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# An unseen dimension of RFK: the Attorney General and national security policy, 1961-1963

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

**AN UNSEEN DIMENSION OF RFK: THE ATTORNEY GENERAL AND  
NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY,**

**1961-1963**

by

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B.A., University of Texas at Austin, 1998

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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**AN UNSEEN DIMENSION TO RFK: THE ATTORNEY GENERAL AND  
NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY**

**1961-1963**

(Order No.        )

**MARK KUKIS**

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2016

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International Relations

**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines the role Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy played in national security policy during the Kennedy administration, drawing on significant new archival sources made available only in recent years. For decades Robert Kennedy's involvement in national security affairs from 1961 to 1963 has gone largely unexamined, in part because of a lack of declassified archival evidence documenting his activities as the overseer of covert operations against Cuba. The writing and research presented here offers the only sustained examination of this aspect of RFK's political life to date, filling a major gap in the historiography.

What emerges is a refined understanding of RFK as a major 20<sup>th</sup> century historical figure challenging conventional narratives characterizing him as an icon of liberalism and a new lens for studying the foreign policy process of the Kennedy administration as a whole. The dissertation shows that RFK was extremely hawkish

during his time as attorney general, a sharp contrast to his later reputation. At the president's behest, the attorney general involved himself in a wide range of national security issues. RFK's actual influence varied depending on the issue. In some cases he was the driving force behind U.S. policy. In others, he was simply one voice among many in the White House inner circle. In others still, he served as a conduit for sensitive communications to and from the president.

Beyond describing RFK's personal role, the dissertation challenges longstanding notions of the foreign policy process in the Kennedy administration by showing how RFK, the consummate White House insider, often struggled to exercise influence as a policymaker. Most scholarship examining the Kennedy administration argues that President Kennedy crafted foreign policy and national security decisions with a small group of advisers who held enormous influence. But, as RFK's experiences in this realm demonstrate, structural forces larger than the influence wielded by individual policymakers appears to have played a greater role in the Kennedy administration than the scholarship to date has recognized.

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## Introduction

Fidel Castro found himself in a thoughtful mood in 2013, when, during an interview with the *Atlantic*, he discussed a few notable American presidents. The semi-retired Cuban leader had just read a biography of Abraham Lincoln, a president he found to be much more intriguing than George Washington. President Kennedy, Castro said, was “young and dramatic,” which led him to make many mistakes. Castro’s comments to the interviewer suggested almost an air of detachment toward President Kennedy, a marked shift from the wrathful feelings Castro held as the two leaders clashed in the early 1960s. But one name brought back some of the old anger: Robert F. Kennedy, who served as attorney general during his brother’s presidency. In Castro’s eyes, President Kennedy made some grave errors as a leader during one of the most intense periods of the Cold War. But RFK, Castro remains convinced, was the one who was actually out to kill him.<sup>1</sup>

Castro had good reason for his feelings. During the Kennedy administration RFK did indeed take a leading role in launching covert operations aimed at toppling the Cuban leader, one of the many areas in foreign policy where the attorney general displayed a Cold War hawkishness that stands in contrast to his prevailing historical image as a dovish liberal. This dissertation fundamentally reshapes our understanding of RFK as a historical figure by closely examining his activities in the national security realm during the Kennedy administration. Present historical

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, *The Atlantic*, Nov. 20, 2013.

writings about RFK tend to focus on his domestic political life and portray him as undergoing a personal transformation in a heroic arc, moving steadily from a reluctant McCarthyite of the 1950s to the embodiment of dovish liberalism in the late 1960s. Evidence marshaled in this dissertation clearly shows that RFK could not be considered even remotely dovish in any defensible sense of the term on foreign policy matters during the entirety of the Kennedy administration, however. The dissertation demonstrates clearly that Attorney General Kennedy was quite the opposite, an unwavering Cold War hawk whose aggressiveness had long, deep roots going back at least to the earliest days of 1961. This dimension to RFK has hitherto gone unrecognized in the historiography, creating a significant distortion in perceptions about RFK. The misrepresentation becomes especially evident in the voluminous writings examining the Cuban Missile Crisis, where RFK's own purposeful deceptions cloud the record. Understanding Attorney General Kennedy in this new way then suggests that RFK's reputation as a liberal in the latter years of his life was an external image constructed by him and his political followers rather than a genuine transformation.

At present no single work offers a sustained examination of Attorney General Kennedy's role in foreign affairs during the Kennedy administration, despite a vast number of books dedicated to the Kennedy brothers and their exploits. The two leading biographies of RFK tend to minimize this aspect of his political life and focus on broader questions about his character and legacy. The 1978 biography by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, devotes very little attention to

RFK's activities on foreign affairs. Schlesinger's narrative places RFK squarely in a domestic political context. So does the narrative advanced by Evan Thomas in his 2000 biography *Robert Kennedy: His Life*. In essence, these and other historical writings about RFK tend to look backward on his life from 1968, when RFK emerged as a leading critic of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam during his own White House campaign. RFK's tragic death amid the campaign helped make that year a watershed moment on the postwar political and cultural timeline. Historians and the reading public alike largely see RFK through the lens of the late 1960s, thereby freezing his image in the moments immediately preceding his death. The 1969 book *85 Days: The Last Campaign of Robert Kennedy* by Jules Witcover helped launch interpretations adhering to this approach, which has continued through recent times with the 2002 book by Joseph Palermo *In His Own Right: The Political Odyssey of Senator Robert F. Kennedy*. As these works suggest, the historiography on RFK largely ignores one of the most fateful parts of his political life, the time he spent at work on national security issues alongside President Kennedy.

In fact, RFK immersed himself in foreign affairs following the Bay of Pigs and remained an important voice on major national security decisions up to President Kennedy's death in 1963. The president urged RFK to become involved in national security issues, and the attorney general responded with alacrity. Cuba stood as the highest priority for RFK from the start, and the attorney general devoted most of the time he spent on national security to that issue. But his involvement in Cuba quickly led him to become active on foreign policy issues ranging from development projects

in Africa to coup plotting in Latin America and Southeast Asia. Existing historiography offers only glimpses of this activity. The most authoritative scholarly account of the Kennedy administration to date is Robert Dallek's 2004 JFK biography *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917 – 1963*. Dallek devotes little attention to RFK's role on national security policy. President Kennedy's war cabinet, which came to include RFK, falls under close scrutiny by Lawrence Freedman in his 2000 book *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam*. Freedman dissects national security policymaking, and RFK does indeed emerge as a player. But Freedman's narrative puts RFK at the edge of an inner circle dominated by figures such as McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara and Maxwell Taylor.

RFK was very much a part of that inner circle, however. He was at the center of decision making on key issues and pursued his own foreign policy agenda at times. Yet none of the existing literature fully reckons with this aspect of RFK's tenure as attorney general. The closest thing to an exception we have to this general rule is David Kaiser's 2009 book *The Road to Dallas: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy*. Kaiser, a respected historian, mined the vast collection of documents compiled for the John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection by the National Archives. RFK's heavy involvement in Cuban affairs comes to light here in significant detail, but Kaiser does not examine RFK's role in other foreign policy matters.

Other works where RFK's participation in foreign policy is a topic of somewhat sustained examination exist primarily outside the realm of academic study,

further underscoring the historiographical importance of this dissertation. Journalistic books such as David Halberstam's 1969 *The Best and the Brightest* and Gus Russo's 2008 book *Brothers in Arms: The Kennedys, Castro and the Politics of Murder* foreground RFK's involvement in Vietnam and Cuba, respectively. They do so, however, without relying on archival evidence. In sum, only fragments of RFK's extensive activities in the realm of foreign policy appear throughout works covering the Kennedys, the Kennedy administration and the Cold War in the early 1960s. But as yet no historian has drawn these narratives together in a holistic way. This dissertation, with relevant new archival material on the topic at its core, fills a major gap in the current scholarship.

The impetus for the project and a core element of the source material used came to light only recently at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. In an unusual arrangement, the Kennedy family had for years withheld 62 boxes of materials from RFK's attorney general files, apparently because they contained potentially embarrassing evidence of RFK's role in covert operations against Castro. Eventually, however, the Kennedy family agreed to hand these papers over to the JFKL, which processed them for release in accordance with standing declassification practices. Archivists deemed four boxes personal, and those remain sealed. The closed boxes apparently relate to family matters involving various members of the Kennedy clan still alive.

The other 58 boxes now newly available all came from either the Classified Files series or the Confidential Files series within the Attorney General papers, and

they opened in three installments: October 2012, July 2013, and December 2013. The appearance of the December 2013 files marked the final release and completed the processing of the Attorney General papers. Virtually all of the newly available documents stem from RFK's work on foreign affairs, and taken together they represents a sizable haul of material not yet integrated into the literature on RFK or the Kennedy administration generally. The two most prominent biographers of RFK to date, Thomas and Schlesinger, did not have full access to these papers. The Kennedy family gave them each some limited access, but both complained about the lacuna even so.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in January of 2014, I undertook a comprehensive review of all the newly available materials, digitizing thousands of pages of important documents in the collection. Elements of the collection are truly revelatory. For example, the hundreds of documents relating to the Central Intelligence Agency in the collection offer fresh glimpses into how deeply enmeshed RFK became in the agency's activities. But the collection poses significant challenges as well. Roughly a third of the contents of any given box remain classified, with documents removed and replaced by withdrawal slips offering little information. These lacunae, spread throughout the newly released attorney general files, create difficulties in sustaining a narrow focus on RFK's dealings in foreign affairs. Given the amount of material remaining classified we simply do not have enough documents to form an unbroken

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<sup>2</sup> Bryan Bender, "Kennedys Keep Vice-Grip on RFK Papers," *Boston Globe*, Aug. 5, 2012. Bender's article highlights the limits placed on Schlesinger. Thomas discusses limited access in the acknowledgments of his 2000 biography *Robert Kennedy: His Life*.

narrative covering RFK's activities on this score with a strict focus on RFK's activities. Furthermore, the documents available for examination in the new materials mostly offer a one-sided view of what information RFK received. For example, there are many reports from the CIA and the State Department in the new materials covering a wide array of subjects. But often there is little or no evidence indicating RFK's thoughts and reactions to the contents of these documents. Still, the new documents allow us to render a much more complete picture than currently exists, especially if we widen the lens and situate RFK within the context of events involving him even when his exact role remains somewhat murky. To that end this dissertation utilizes additional archival materials such as the JFK Assassination Records and the document sets covering the Kennedy administration in volumes of the State Department's Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS).

At times in the pages ahead RFK necessarily moves to the edge of the frame as the document base falls short in offering enough material to maintain a narrow focus on his specific actions. But the document record we have puts RFK nonetheless in the picture of all events discussed here, and what follows is the fullest possible account of RFK's involvement with the evidence currently available.

Formal declassification reviews requested by researchers offer hope of prying loose more documents in the near future that can help expand this picture. In fact, some of the requests I have submitted on roughly 160 items have already produced results. The National Archives has declassified more than two dozen documents from this collection per my requests, and a number factor into the research appearing in the

following pages with significant insights. Further declassification will undoubtedly add to this new narrative, but for the moment this is the most comprehensive account.

## **I. RFK and the Bay of Pigs**

### **A View from the Sidelines**

In the early months of the Kennedy administration RFK absorbed himself in domestic issues as the newly appointed attorney general, but the looming conflagration in Cuba drew his attention nonetheless. Initially Cuba emerged as a small, if ominous, distraction for RFK, a foreign policy matter the president addressed mainly with his formal national security team. Very soon, however, Cuba became the attorney general's most pressing foreign policy concern. The president drew RFK into Cuban affairs increasingly as the Bay of Pigs neared, and RFK moved to insert himself into matters too as the issue took on the dimensions of a major political crisis. The ensuing debacle transformed RFK and his role within the White House. For the rest of the Kennedy administration RFK fixated on Cuba with an intensity matched by no other official. His early dealings on Cuba heavily shaped the approach he adopted in handling the issue later, coloring his perceptions and driving his actions and thinking. President Kennedy inherited from his predecessor a plan to topple Fidel Castro; neither the president nor the attorney general ever seriously questioned the need to do that. Moreover, the general plans for removing Castro crafted by the Eisenhower administration formed the basis of the future measures RFK would oversee as the administration's *de facto* Cuba tsar, a template he and others would utilize again and again in launching their own efforts. Importantly, the Bay of Pigs and its aftermath drove RFK to form connections with a host of desperate actors, American and Cuban

alike. Those connections became some of the most important relationships RFK forged while attorney general. RFK's unexpected immersion in Cuba during the opening months of 1961 ultimately propelled the attorney general into the upper rungs of the national security establishment, where he would remain a fixture until President Kennedy's death.

The Bay of Pigs plan was in fact already unraveling by the time RFK first heard about it in detail shortly after Inauguration Day in 1961. The rebel force of Cuban exiles created by the Central Intelligence Agency to confront Castro was wasting away, despite months of training at their secret base in the mountainous jungles of Guatemala. Fighters of Brigade 2506, as they called themselves, were becoming a deadly force to be sure. They had the ability and the will to inflict significant bloodshed and destruction, as they would soon show. But Castro was growing stronger too, and his forces would ultimately outmatch the invaders. The Cuban leader had sensed the threat and armed and prepared with help from Moscow, turning his island into a virtual garrison state.<sup>3</sup> Matters only worsened as time passed. The odds of the rebels striking a decisive blow dwindled day by day in the early weeks of 1961 given Castro's moves to protect himself. If something were to be done, if the rebels were to launch a plausible attempt to overthrow the regime in Havana, then the incoming Kennedy administration had to act soon.<sup>4</sup> This was the scenario the new administration confronted.

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<sup>3</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Jan. 22, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. X, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

RFK took in this grim picture while sitting among more than a dozen of the most senior national security officials in Washington. The group met at the State Department on a weekend just days after the inauguration since the matter was so urgent. CIA chief Allen Dulles, his protégée Richard Bissell and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer led a group of holdovers from the Eisenhower administration. Unquestioned doyens of the national security establishment under President Eisenhower, Dulles and Bissell in particular embodied the old guard of the cold war, a conflict they waged in full regardless of elections. The young Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk represented the new president's national security team at the meeting, with RFK close at their side. The group listened as Dulles, Lemnitzer and other officials described the ongoing covert operations at the heart of the so-called Cuba Project.<sup>5</sup>

At a remote location in Guatemala, some 600 Cubans were undergoing paramilitary training, the group was told. They stood as the armed wing of a political front also organized and funded by the CIA, which had provided the Cuban rebels with a small air force consisting of about two dozen World War II planes. The project sought nothing less than to foment a counterrevolution against Castro and install a pro-American junta. The plot had begun in the early months of 1960, and initially the idea had been to have the paramilitary fighters infiltrate Cuba in small bands to sow a rebellion that would sweep Castro from power. But now, inside Cuba, tens of thousands of national police officers and militiamen hunted dissenters all over

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<sup>5</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Jan. 22, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. X, 24.

the island. Any subversives lived deep underground or had left the island. Sparking an insurgency amid such internal security seemed unlikely. A more overt campaign, an outright attack by the rebel force, emerged as a risky but necessary option. The CIA wanted guidance from the new administration on how to proceed.

Hearing all this, McNamara asked Dulles how big the exile force needed to be in order to overthrow Castro. Once the Cuban brigade reached full strength, Dulles said, they could perhaps attack Cuba openly with an amphibious landing, seize a beachhead and consolidate enough territory to stand up a government in arms, which could then conceivably attract supporters from across the island. But success was uncertain at best. At the same time the Cubans in Guatemala had to go somewhere and soon. Keeping them in Guatemala was untenable. The exiles were growing impatient, and their presence posed political problems for the Guatemalan leadership. Returning them to the United States, where many had been recruited by the CIA from the Cuban exile community, posed major problems too. A disbanded guerrilla force privy to CIA secret war plans was unlikely to keep quiet.<sup>6</sup> Also, as RFK recalled later in an oral history interview, disbanding rebels posed a political problem for President Kennedy: “If he hadn’t gone ahead with it everybody would have said it showed that he had no courage because Eisenhower trained these people. It was Eisenhower’s plan.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Jan. 22, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. X, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, p. 51, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

At one point in the meeting RFK spoke up to say that five days prior an attorney who had formerly worked for Castro reached out to him suggesting that Raul Castro, Fidel's brother, closest confidant and ultimate successor, was considering defecting. The scenario seemed unlikely, and the group turned its attention to what was becoming a key question: Where should the Cuban brigade land? The Isle of Pines off the southern coast of Cuba offered a possibility. But wouldn't a mainland attack stand a better chance of triggering action among rebels still inside Cuba? The whole affair, Secretary of State Rusk stated, carried extraordinary dangers. U.S. adventurism against Cuba risked sparking deadly confrontations in regions much farther away, Rusk said. Money for the project was discussed. Further meetings were planned. Nothing concrete was decided.<sup>8</sup> But every person at the meeting came away aware that serious and likely bloody events were taking shape on the horizon with regard to Cuba.

RFK was not entirely sure why he had been invited to that briefing.<sup>9</sup> True, he was no stranger to the Cuba issue, which was increasingly entangled with domestic matters. Around the time RFK attended the meeting at the State Department, the attorney general heard from the Federal Bureau of Investigation that casino moguls with ties to organized crime had approached the Democratic Revolutionary Front, known by its Spanish acronym FRD, then the main Cuban rebel group in Miami supported by the CIA. The gambling barons offered \$2 million in financial support

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<sup>8</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Jan. 22, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. X, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, pp. 41-42, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

of their own to the group.<sup>10</sup> Castro's revolution had been very bad for a host of casino owners who flourished under the old regime. Castro's rebel movement had long condemned Cuba's lavish casinos, casting them as symbols of the Batista regime's links to organized crime. When the revolution came, looters swarmed the casinos, and the new regime shuttered the gambling industry.<sup>11</sup> Castro ordered casino operators out of Cuba and promised to execute any he found.<sup>12</sup> The casino owners badly wanted back into Cuba and believed a successful overthrow of Castro would open the way. The fact that mobsters and shady casino owners were lurking around Cuban rebels tied to the CIA was certainly cause for concern for the new attorney general. Also, Cuba had been a major topic of debate during the 1960 White House campaign, which RFK had managed for his brother. Senator John F. Kennedy struck a hawkish stance on the Cuban question in his run against Vice President Richard Nixon, arguing essentially that the Eisenhower administration had not been tough enough with Castro. The Kennedy administration would be stronger, or so the campaign rhetoric went.<sup>13</sup> Now the new administration had a chance to demonstrate its resolve. And Robert Kennedy, one of the president's most trusted advisers, would be likely to play a role in any major decisions on Cuba, a reality evident to all involved. Probably for this reason RFK began receiving daily intelligence summaries of happenings in Cuba along with the rest of the paper flow that streamed to his office

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<sup>10</sup> Memo from FBI Director to the Attorney General, Jan. 23, 1961. JFK Assassination Records, FBI files, Record Number 124-90055-10140.

<sup>11</sup> Associated Press, *New York Times*, Jan. 4, 1959.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Ragano, *Mob Lawyer*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, p. 290.

at the Justice Department.<sup>14</sup> RFK might have been confused about the reason why he was invited to attend a major national security meeting, but others there and elsewhere in the administration evidently were not. Still, Cuba as a policy matter stood well outside RFK's portfolio as attorney general.

In those early days of the administration RFK attended a couple of cabinet meetings where foreign policy was the main topic, but he had little reason to take an active role in such discussions. Running the Justice Department was after all chiefly a domestic job. When the lawyer with supposed connections to Raul Castro contacted RFK again February, the attorney general referred him to the State Department.<sup>15</sup> The attorney general of course was the brother of the president, which allowed him some purview on any range of matters. Everyone in the White House seemed recognize this even before the Bay of Pigs. But in the opening months of the administration RFK was very much the younger brother and a conspicuously junior member of the White House Cabinet. Most of the men close to President Kennedy were much older with credentials that far outclassed the young attorney general, whose inexperience drew criticism in the press and public ribbing from his older brother. RFK took it all in stride but remained conscious of his limited gravitas within the administration. He was there because he was the president's brother, not because he was an ace lawyer, brilliant mind or political heavyweight, qualities virtually all senior members of the administration shared except RFK.

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<sup>14</sup> See box 201, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY. The dozens of intelligence briefs here offer a mix of news summaries and intelligence snippets.

<sup>15</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Feb. 4, 1961, FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. X, 36.

For a time in the early part of 1961, RFK spent much of his days just meeting with reporters. The new administration in Washington prompted a crush of news coverage. RFK knew many journalists from the campaign trail, and he served as a kind of second press secretary for the president.<sup>16</sup> When not mingling with journalists, Kennedy worked at crafting an agenda for the Justice Department. Right away he focused on stepping up efforts against organized crime, a longtime political cause of his. Within weeks of being on the job RFK overhauled the department's special organized crime unit, changing the leadership and increasing the size until it numbered more than sixty attorneys. Kennedy envisioned a coordinated drive against organized crime, a campaign that would bring all relevant arms of the government into the fight. He called for a meeting with Federal Bureau of Investigation Director J. Edgar Hoover, Internal Revenue Service Commissioner Mortimer Caplin and Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon to hammer out the plan. Then he summoned all the investigative agencies of government departments and urged them to share information with one another, especially in coming up with a list of major underworld figures to target. RFK also set up a special unit devoted to pursuing the Teamsters, led by his nemesis James Hoffa. Walter Sheridan, one of RFK's closest aides, took charge of the initiative.<sup>17</sup> And so things might have continued, with Kennedy increasingly consumed by the everyday tasks of running a massive government agency. In many ways Kennedy looked set to stay in his departmental lane like any

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, February 29, 1964, pp. 30-31, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, February 29, 1964 p. 39, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

cabinet member in any given administration. Like other senior officials in government, he might have spent his days wrestling with bureaucracy, fighting to implement his own programs and playing obligatory Washington politics. But Cuba would change everything.

### **The Plot and the Players**

The Cuba Project began officially in March 1960, when President Eisenhower approved a CIA covert campaign to bring down Castro. At its heart, the original plan amounted to classic guerrilla strategy as advocated by the likes of Mao Zedong, Ernesto “Che” Guevara and indeed Castro himself. Small bands of commando subversives operating mainly in rural areas would recruit followers and stoke rebellion. The CIA would hide its backing of the rebels by having agents pose as American businessmen supporting the opposition. Castro’s revolution had indeed left a great many American business interests deeply unhappy.<sup>18</sup> But the cover story never mounted to anything more than a thin veil to Castro and the Cuban exiles who began working with the CIA, which assigned hundreds of agents to the project.<sup>19</sup> The agency established a sprawling base of operations in Coral Gables near Miami during the summer of 1960. The project headquarters office was a converted office building disguised as an electronics firm, a cover the CIA hoped would dispel suspicions about

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<sup>18</sup> CIA, Inspector General’s Survey of the Cuban Operations, Oct. 1961, Vol. I, pp. 3-4. Available at: [www.foia.cia.gov](http://www.foia.cia.gov).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

the place's massive amounts of security and communications equipment.<sup>20</sup> The agency also acquired a number of safe houses in the area and took over an old World War II airbase just outside the city. Thus Miami became the center of activity.<sup>21</sup> But the project expanded widely as the months passed in 1960, with bases, safe houses and various facilities of one kind or another appearing in New Orleans plus Florida locales such as Key West, Useppa Island and Opa-locka. Puerto Rico, Guatemala and Panama hosted sites related to the operation, too.

Troubling questions without easy answers weighed increasingly heavily on the minds of CIA planners and Cuban exiles involved in the operation during the early days of 1961. Was the Cuba project even feasible in light of Castro's strengthened hand? Could the operation remain covert given its size? What would the new president do? Once in office JFK quickly authorized further work on the plan and had the CIA submit its latest version to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which okayed the operation.<sup>22</sup> But the plan the new White House initially sanctioned in January needed modification within weeks. On February 17 the CIA told President Kennedy that the original idea of inserting small bands of guerrillas was no longer feasible. Castro's forces would likely just hunt down the infiltrators. Only an invasion force capable of seizing and holding territory stood a chance, but the window for launching such an attack was closing rapidly because of Castro's newly established weapons pipeline with the Soviet bloc. The CIA estimated that in no

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<sup>20</sup> Howard Hunt, *Give us This Day*, p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> CIA, Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operations, Oct. 1961, Vol. I, p. 10. Available at: [www.foia.cia.gov](http://www.foia.cia.gov).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

more than six months Castro would be strong enough to fend off anything except a full-scale military assault.<sup>23</sup> The administration's window for action grew ever more narrow.

Reports on attack plans by Cuban exiles based in Miami and Guatemala appeared regularly in the news in the weeks before assault. Hardly a day passed without a major newspaper somewhere around the country carrying an item about the Cuban exile force gathering for a strike against Castro. For example, on April 10, 1961, the *Boston Globe* carried an Associated Press story reporting that Cuban exile pilots were leaving the Miami area for a secret base somewhere in Central America. The story, originally appearing in the *Miami Herald*, stated that the pilots "were rounded up shortly before last midnight and taken to an embarkation depot by Cuban revolutionary leaders. The men will be spirited out of the country to join others who have gone into Cuba to fight Castro or to training bases reportedly operating in Central American countries."<sup>24</sup> Such stories had been seeping into the press steadily for months, despite all the CIA's efforts at secrecy.<sup>25</sup> As the day of the attack approached the news seemed full of open talk about war, while the visible buzz of activity and anticipation among the Cuban exiles themselves rose and rose.<sup>26</sup> Jose Miro Cardona, the president of the Revolutionary Council in Exile, appeared in Washington for meetings at the State Department, leaving little question over U.S.

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<sup>23</sup> CIA, Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operations, Oct. 1961, Vol. I, p. 23. Available at: [www.foia.cia.gov](http://www.foia.cia.gov).

<sup>24</sup> Associated Press, *Boston Globe*, April 10, 1961.

<sup>25</sup> CIA, Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operations, Oct. 1961, Vol. I, p. 61. Available at: [www.foia.cia.gov](http://www.foia.cia.gov).

<sup>26</sup> Tad Szulc, *New York Times*, April 16, 1961.

collusion despite unflinching American denials.<sup>27</sup> Senior Cuban officials, who had their own effective intelligence network in addition to the news reports, angrily pointed fingers at Washington. According to the FBI, Castro had more than two hundred intelligence agents at work among the exiles in the Miami area as the operation took root there.<sup>28</sup> G-2, the Cuban military intelligence service, knew many details about the CIA camps as of January.<sup>29</sup> Cuban Foreign Minister Raul Roa even publically accused the United States of training and equipping a rebel force numbering up to 5,000 fighters based in Florida and Guatemala just days before the attack.<sup>30</sup> Guatemalan President Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes, meanwhile, openly acknowledged the presence of Cuban guerrilla fighters in his country and admitted that U.S. military trainers were among them. But he denied any invasion plan was afoot. The guerrilla fighters were there for defensive purposes, he said during an interview with the *New York Times*.<sup>31</sup> The Kennedy administration's longstanding disavowals of involvement with plots against Castro were sounding just as farfetched as virtually everyone watching the situation waited for what seemed an inevitable battle. The exiles, supported by the Americans, would attack. Castro was ready, but Cuba might plunge into civil war nonetheless. No intelligent observer could doubt

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<sup>27</sup> New York Times News Service, *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 1961.

<sup>28</sup> Howard Hunt, *Give us this Day*, p. 60.

<sup>29</sup> Cuban G-2 (military intelligence), "Report on mercenary camps and bases in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Florida" (forwarded to Cuban President Osvaldo Dorticos Torrado)," January 12, 1961, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Released by Cuban Government for 22-24 March 2001 conference ("Bay of Pigs: 40 Years After") in Havana. Translated by National Security Archive. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115184>.

<sup>30</sup> New York Times News Service, *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 1961.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Kennedy, *New York Times*, April 11, 1961.

any of this in the latter part of spring that year. The only question was when. What day would the attack come?

The president called RFK about a week before the invasion. JFK wanted the attorney general briefed on what was developing. Someone from the Central Intelligence Agency would be coming to the Justice Department, the president told RFK. The man who appeared shortly thereafter in the attorney general's office was not your average CIA briefer. It was Bissell, whose official CIA title was deputy director for plans, a position that made him essentially the operational head of covert activities.<sup>32</sup> The Cuba Project was Bissell's baby, and he was feeling very good about it as he sat down alone with the attorney general. Like Dulles, Bissell evinced all the airs of a gentleman spy. Tall, urbane and handsome, he had an Ivy League pedigree and held a Ph.D. in economics. At the CIA Bissell became a star during the Eisenhower administration for his work developing the U-2 spy plane, a transformative piece of technology that gave America a decisive edge at a critical moment in the cold war. In 1961 Bissell could reasonably hold out hope for leading the CIA one day. Until then, he stood at the shoulder of Dulles, whose status as a Washington untouchable could be matched only by FBI Director Hoover.<sup>33</sup>

Bissell explained the updated plan to overthrow Castro to the attorney general. Things had changed significantly since the meeting both had attended in January. The CIA had been refining the operation for months. Indeed, Bissell and Dulles

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, pp. 42-43, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>33</sup> Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, p. 130.

personally had been working closely with President Kennedy on finalizing it. As of April 12, the CIA planners envisioned an operation that would look like an internal revolt sparked by the arrival of small bands of guerrilla infiltrators under the leadership of Cardona and the Revolutionary Council, an umbrella group comprising a range of Cuban dissidents. The operation was not supposed to look like an invasion, nor was it to appear to be supported by the United States. In the hopes of clouding the reality many already perceived, Cardona had joined the chorus of denials about U.S. involvement in the days leading up to the attack, stressing that Cuban counterrevolution was the responsibility of the Cuban people.<sup>34</sup>

Cardona's fighters needed air support, but the rebels must appear as though they had come into the possession of warplanes without American help. An elaborate ruse would accomplish this. Initial airstrikes by the Cuban brigade's warplanes would knock out Castro's planes. Immediately after that the CIA would have a Cuban B-26 land in Miami. A Cuban pilot would emerge saying that he and two other B-26 pilots had defected, stolen planes and strafed their Cuban airport before flying to Florida. Meanwhile, an invasion force of more than 1,000 guerrillas would be wading ashore from a flotilla escorted at a distance by the U.S. Navy. The main force of raiders would hit beaches in southeastern Cuba in three groups. A week after those men were safely operating ashore another invasion force would land on the western end of the island. The rebel bands would join forces with an estimated 7,000 insurgents in waiting. A new revolution would erupt, sweeping the island and

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<sup>34</sup> CIA, Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation and Associated Documents, Vol. I, October 1961, Annex E, pp.1-5. Available at: [www.foia.cia.gov](http://www.foia.cia.gov).

toppling the Castro regime in short order. That was the idea. There were other details such as a diversionary pre-invasion force and airdrops of supplies to be made in the days after the landings.<sup>35</sup> But the essence of the plan was simple enough: knock out Castro's planes, land the rebels and watch an unstoppable uprising unfold.

Bissell was upbeat about the prospects. The fighters were well trained and almost feverish with an eagerness to attack. The target beach was a fine place to land, Bissell told the attorney general. Sure, there was chance Castro's forces would confront the rebels as they hit the shore and prevent them from capturing any territory in the first go. But the terrain around the landing area was good guerrilla country. If Castro's forces immediately descended on the rebels then they would simply melt into the mountains and regroup. An insurgency against Castro would arise either way once the fighters from Brigade 2506 were on the ground in Cuba, Bissell argued. RFK asked only a few questions of Bissell, who sensed a bit of apprehension in RFK's quietness. At bottom the whole plan hinged on the rebels' ability to seize and hold a beachhead, a feat Bissell assured the attorney general was doable. "I hope you're right," RFK said.<sup>36</sup> Bissell and others at the CIA indeed felt certain, however. Efforts on the Cuba project had been slow going with more than a few false starts and wrong turns. But things were now coming together, Bissell and other CIA planners believed. The agency had set in motion an operation that would take Castro from power much as CIA plots had undone the leaders of Iran, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic during recent years.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, pp. 182-183.

Much more contentious discussion about the plan erupted at the White House in the days leading up to the invasion, and now RFK joined the talks. Both JFK and RFK clearly had reasons for doubting the plan, and neither of the Kennedys ever seemed to fully embrace the CIA assumptions about a Cuban uprising materializing upon the invasion. But the president had allowed the plan to proceed nonetheless. In RFK's mind, one of the main reasons the president did so was because of the political difficulty of turning back. Abandoning the plan would likely open the door for political opponents to label JFK soft on communism, a president who stood in the way of freedom fighters whom Eisenhower had supported.<sup>37</sup> But the problems with the plan became more evident as the day of the attack neared, and JFK clearly grew increasingly less comfortable with the idea. The president was going over and over the details before giving his final assent. He insisted on the ability to call the whole operation off up to twenty-four hours before its launch.<sup>38</sup> And the more the president probed the plan, the more skeptical he became.<sup>39</sup> Castro, having readied the island for battle, would likely field more than 20,000 troops to meet the guerrillas once they landed. How long could less than 2,000 insurgents hold out against such a force on a beachhead or retreating into the hills? The presence of the invaders was supposed to spark a general uprising, but how a revolt could take shape in Castro's police state remained unclear.

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview with John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, p. 51, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, p. 360.

<sup>39</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 249.

Also, Kennedy had said repeatedly that U.S. forces would not intervene if the invaders got into trouble. He stressed this again and again to the CIA, to the Pentagon and to the rebels themselves through a special envoy. But the president nonetheless got the sense, rightly, that many involved believed American military backing was assured.<sup>40</sup> How could the president allow the campaign to fail once it began? He would not let the exiles die on the beaches. He could not pass up the best chance to overthrow Castro anyone was likely to see for some time to come. But JFK meant what he said, in part because he saw Cuba as integrally connected to other potential Cold War flashpoints. Overt U.S. aggression against Cuba could prompt a Soviet countermove in Laos or Germany or Vietnam. Washington had already tipped its hand far too much in allowing the supposedly secret operation to appear so visibly in the press. Some plausible claim of deniability must remain, however thin. Direct use of U.S. military forces to back the rebels would rip the veil from this needed political fiction. RFK had no significant involvement in talks surrounding the Bay of Pig planning and did not have a chance to express feelings about whether U.S. troops should become directly involved in support of the rebel landing. If he had, however, RFK would almost certainly have advocated for the use of U.S. troops as a last resort. As we will see, RFK consistently favored direct U.S. military intervention in Cuba as well as other extreme measures.

The president's most trusted advisers, almost to a one, sought to reassure JFK on the eve of the invasion. Dulles, who had orchestrated the overthrow of the

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<sup>40</sup> Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, pp. 360-361.

Guatemalan government in 1954, told the president that odds of success looked better for Cuba than they had in Guatemala.<sup>41</sup> McNamara was in favor of going forward, as was Rusk. The Joint Chiefs all voiced their support. The unanimity of the war council carried special weight with the Kennedy brothers, who felt they had an excellent national security team in place. The Kennedy brothers wanted to believe the men they had entrusted with guiding the White House on such matters would not allow them to go astray. Indeed they were counting on it.<sup>42</sup>

One of the few voices of dissent in the White House came from Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., a normally deferential professor who had joined the administration as a special advisor to the president. Schlesinger by his own account was too intimidated to challenge the wisdom of the war council in cabinet meetings. He was a mouse in a bowtie facing hardened warriors with chests full of medals.<sup>43</sup> But the Kennedy brothers trusted Schlesinger's advice, which he gave quietly to both. In private conversations and in memos he wrote in the weeks and days leading up to the invasion, Schlesinger urged the president to abandon the scheme. "No matter how 'Cuban' the equipment and personnel, the U.S. will be held accountable for the operation, and our prestige will be committed to its success," Schlesinger wrote in one of his warning memos to the president.<sup>44</sup> Schlesinger tried with the attorney general too. Just days before the invaders were set to storm the beach RFK and his

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, p. 362.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview with John Bartlow Martin, Feb. 29, pp. 35-36, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>43</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, pp. 240-241 and pp. 254-256.

<sup>44</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 254.

wife Ethel were hosting one of the many lively parties they held at Hickory Hill, their expansive home in McLean, Virginia. It was Ethel's birthday celebration.

Schlesinger was among the guests and had a private aside with the attorney general about the plan for Cuba. "I hear you don't think much of this business," Kennedy said, asking why. Schlesinger explained his concerns, many of which the president openly shared. Robert listened without expression. "You may be right or you may be wrong," he said, closing the talk. "But the president has made his mind up. Don't push it any further. Now is the time for everyone to help him all we can."<sup>45</sup> Clearly doubts about the plan stayed with JFK and RFK as it began to unfold. Neither of the Kennedys seemed to ever fully embrace the most optimistic CIA assumptions of success. But they saw no options for turning back without extreme political costs, and the advisers they had so carefully selected to offer wisdom on such matters only urged them forward.

### **Managing Disaster**

In the darkness of the hours before their dawn attack, the roughly 1,400 fighters of Brigade 2506 moved through the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea sailing aboard seven rusting transport ships crammed with weapons and supplies, all under the watch of a U.S. Navy escort. The men who had come together to form the brigade represented many segments of Cuban society. Two hundred and forty of them were students. One hundred and thirty-five were former military men. The rest had done a

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

variety of jobs before joining the cause. There were ministers, geologists, engineers, teachers, truck drivers and clerks among them.<sup>46</sup> At sunrise they would storm a beach in their homeland and sound what all hoped would be a death knell for Castro and his hated regime. The opening blows of the battle had already come even as they moved. The exiles' warplanes had attacked their targets in Cuba in the hope of crippling Castro's air force and thus clearing the skies for the invaders. Reports suggesting success for the airstrikes reached the flotilla, and as they neared the beachhead the men sang and cheered at speeches by their officers.<sup>47</sup> They sensed a victory at hand, one that would fulfill dreams of triumphal homecomings nurtured through many dark days in months past.

Jose Perez San Roman and Manuel Francisco Artime led the brigade. A former Cuban army officer, San Roman had initially welcomed Castro's revolution in 1959 but quickly became disillusioned with the new regime, which jailed him for dissent. Pepe, as he was widely known, managed to escape and fled to Miami, where he immediately began plotting against Castro with other exiles gathering there in 1960. In May of that year Pepe met Artime, who had a similar story. Artime had connections to the CIA, which helped smuggle him out of Cuba late in 1959. In the following months, as the agency developed its plan to oust Castro, Artime emerged as a possible rebel leader in the minds of CIA officers. He was young (not yet thirty years old) pliable, eager and naïve. And he owed a lot to the CIA agents he had come to know. The agency had plenty of resources to offer Artime, but he needed allies.

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<sup>46</sup> Haynes Johnson, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

So Artime reached out to San Roman and many others, recruiting volunteers among the Miami Cubans.<sup>48</sup> Many were eager to join, and soon the exiles backed by the CIA formed a center of gravity in the Miami community.

Relations between the exiles and the CIA proved difficult from the beginning. Initially the prominent Cuban leaders, including Artime, demanded a huge budget from the CIA and a free hand to spend it. Many had helped Castro in his revolution against Fulgencio Batista. We staged one successful revolution in Cuba, they told their CIA liaisons and paymasters, and we could do it again. Just give us the money and get out of the way.<sup>49</sup> The CIA disagreed. The agency insisted on close control of the Cuba Project and displayed an undisguised paternalism in dealing with the exiles, whom were often made to feel beholden to their U.S. handlers. Few of the hundreds of CIA personnel at work on the Cuba project in fact even spoke Spanish.<sup>50</sup> They tended to view the exiles as pawns and sometimes treated them like children. Still, many Cubans who got involved felt cause for hope, especially after the 1960 election. The incoming president was young, Catholic and outspoken in his support of Cuban exiles. Perhaps their war could be won.

By the fall of 1960 the rebel force was training in earnest at their crude camp in the highlands of Guatemala. There the brigade effectively came into being under the tutelage of paramilitary experts furnished by the CIA and the Pentagon.

Surrounded by acres of coffee bushes, the place consisted of little more than an

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<sup>48</sup> Haynes Johnson, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 25-33.

<sup>49</sup> Howard Hunt, *Give us This Day*, pp. 44-46.

<sup>50</sup> CIA, Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operations, Oct. 1961, Vol. I, p. 44. Available at: [www.foia.cia.gov](http://www.foia.cia.gov).

airstrip, a few unpaved roads, a mess hall and barracks for the trainees. One of the brigade members, a fighter named Carlos Rafael Santana, died early on, perishing in a climbing accident. Santana was the first casualty for the group, which honored his memory by naming the brigade after his trainee number, 2506.<sup>51</sup> The camp had problems beyond rugged terrain, though, and many times spirits flagged in the barracks. Conditions generally were poor. Equipment of all kinds was in short supply. The sequestered men felt lonely, homesick and sometimes doubtful about U.S. will to see the plan through to its end, despite all the promises. But finally in the spring of 1961 a day for battle was set. The time had come.

In the days before the assault the brigade left their base in Guatemala and gathered at a staging ground in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, where they found ships waiting for them. By April 12 the entire force, including the warplanes, stood poised for attack from Nicaragua.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile in Washington Kennedy declared publically that the United States would not stage an intervention in Cuba when questioned by journalists about rumors of U.S action against Castro. Planners of the invasion at the CIA did not believe the president. They thought Kennedy was offering up a brilliant smokescreen for the unfolding plan, which deliberately held open the possibility of U.S. armed forces becoming involved.<sup>53</sup> In Puerto Cabezas, fighters of Brigade 2506 readied for battle trusting that U.S. military support was assured. They believed the plan was to establish a beachhead and await the arrival of a government in arms led

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<sup>51</sup> Haynes Johnson, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 47-48 and pp. 55-56.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>53</sup> Howard Hunt, *Give Us This Day*, pp. 188-189.

by Cardona, who would immediately draw full support from the United States. The brigade would land and fight to hold territory until help came, they believed.<sup>54</sup> There was no talk among the rebels of going into the hills as the flotilla came quietly to a halt off the beaches of the inlet on April 17 shortly after midnight. The men lowered landing crafts from the ships and began slipping as stealthily as they could toward the shore.

Long before the brigade set sail the CIA estimated that Castro had a uniformed army of 32,000 plus another 200,000 loyal militia fighters equipped with up to 40 thousand tons of arms supplied by the Soviet Union.<sup>55</sup> This was in addition of course to Castro's small but effective air force, which the initial rebel airstrikes failed to destroy. Any real hope the brigade had for victory rested mainly on two things, a lack of will among Castro's forces and a genuine popular uprising thrown into motion by the arrival of the rebels. Scant evidence existed suggesting either scenario was likely, much less both at once. No insurgent cells operated inside Cuba, at least as far as the CIA knew. No intelligence in CIA possession supported the claim that ordinary Cubans would flock to the invaders once they arrived.<sup>56</sup> On the contrary, Castro's security forces appeared to have become as effective as the most oppressive regimes in Eastern Europe in stifling dissent and rounding up agitators. Few Cubans in Cuba seemed ready stage open defiance, for if they sided with the invading rebels and lost life would most certainly become much worse. And

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<sup>54</sup> Haynes Johnson, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>55</sup> CIA, Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operations, Oct. 1961, Vol. I, p. 55. Available at: [www.foia.cia.gov](http://www.foia.cia.gov).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

whatever expectations the CIA and the rebels fostered about weak resolve among Castro's forces disappeared completely in their first steps on Cuban soil. Militia forces immediately spotted the invaders, opened fire and radioed word to the military. The bloody battle flashing to life in the darkness of April 17 would last three days.

Castro lashed out swiftly once the invaders hit the beach, pummeling them with airstrikes at dawn and hurling a column of troops toward rebel positions. Castro's warplanes had knocked out a key rebel supply ship, and the brigade fighters quickly ran low on ammunition as Cuban forces, led by Castro himself, swarmed them. Meanwhile, as the battle on the beach unfolded, Castro's internal security forces arrested more than two hundred thousand suspected insurrectionists elsewhere around the country. Police herded Cubans into theaters, ballparks, auditoriums and other gathering places, keeping them there until Castro was sure he had the island under control.<sup>57</sup> The operation appeared entirely doomed before the first full day closed.

The president and the attorney general both had left Washington for nearby points in Virginia as the invasion got underway. The president and the first lady retreated to their rented estate called Glen Ora, nestled in horse country just outside the capital. RFK traveled to Williamsburg for a speaking engagement. He got a call from JFK just before the president gave his final okay. Did RFK have any reservations, the president wanted to know? No, the attorney general said. The two hung up, and the president gave the order to go. The next call RFK got from the

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<sup>57</sup> Haynes Johnson, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 117-118.

president came about thirty-six hours later. The rebels had landed, JFK said. Things looked bad. Come back to Washington.<sup>58</sup> The attorney general quickly returned and went to the White House, where three days of crisis meetings drew senior administration officials gloomily together.

Admiral Arleigh Burke, the longtime chief of naval operations, rushed with other Pentagon officials April 18 to the White House, where President Kennedy huddled in the Cabinet Room with officials from the CIA and the State Department, trying to figure out what was happening. No one seemed to know much beyond the reports that the operation was quickly becoming a bloody loss. A brusque old military man, Burke listened at the edge of the group around the president, occasionally muttering “balls” as the few available details came into view. No one seemed sure what to advise the president to do. If there were anything to do, some action for the president to order, the Navy would have to respond. Thus Burke became for a moment a central player in the crisis management. The president pulled Burke, McNamara, Rusk, Dulles and Lemnitzer into the Oval Office. What could be done, the president wanted to know? Rusk cautioned against doing much, and President Kennedy ordered Burke to arrange aerial reconnaissance of the bay so they could have more information. Burke did so, and moments later Robert Kennedy rang him on the phone. The president is going to rely on you to advise him in this situation, the attorney general told Burke. The rest of the advisers were not being helpful. Burke told the attorney general that would be bypassing McNamara and

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, February 29, 1964 pp. 45-46, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

Lemnitzer. RFK said he knew.<sup>59</sup> The president's august war council was standing around him helplessly in the first real crisis they faced together. Suddenly the president's inner circle of trusted advisers effectively collapsed to two people, JFK and his brother. RFK set to forming a crisis team that could actually help the situation and reached out to the aged admiral.

Burke ultimately had no answers. No one did. The besieged rebels needed help. Only U.S. airstrikes and probably fire from U.S. navy ships lurking near the Cuban coast offered a chance to save them. But such a rescue would amount to direct military involvement and risk reprisal by the Soviet Union. The president would not do it. He remained true to his word much to the dismay of the CIA planners and the Cubans on the beach, where they begged for help. Pepe sent frantic pleas that made their way back to the White House. "Do you people realize how desperate the situation is?" one of his messages read. "Do you back us or quit? All we want is low jet cover. Enemy has this. I need it badly or cannot survive. Pepe." Another one sent only hours later said: "Can you throw something into this vital point in the battle. Anything. Just let jet pilots loose. Pepe."<sup>60</sup> RFK saw one final report from Pepe: "We fired our last shell – we're all taking to the swamp."<sup>61</sup> It was over. The rebels left more than a hundred fallen comrades behind them as they fled, scattered and scrambling through the countryside. A small number of fighters managed to retreat into the sea and make their way to U.S. navy ships undertaking cautious rescue

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<sup>59</sup> Memoranda of Conversation, April 19, 1961, FRUS, 1961-63, Vol. X, 121.

<sup>60</sup> Haynes Johnson, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 155.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, February 29, 1964 p. 50, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

missions. But in the end most of those who survived wound up captured and thrown into Castro's jails, where they would serve as trophies and bargaining chips for the newly empowered Cuban leader.

The attorney general was a novice cold warrior at best before the Bay of Pigs. His political life before revolved mostly around domestic issues. But RFK easily stepped into the role of Cold War hawk once the Bay of Pigs crisis took shape. In years past RFK had generally held a Manichean worldview, a mindset that dovetailed with his self-image as an anticommunist crusader on the domestic front in the 1950s. These traits and a family connection led RFK in 1953 to work briefly as a staffer for the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, chaired then Senator Joseph McCarthy.<sup>62</sup> RFK quickly distanced himself from McCarthy as the senator's fortunes fell, but the underlying sentiments that drew RFK to McCarthy in the first place seemed to endure and stay with him throughout the Kennedy administration. RFK clearly considered himself an unflinching anticommunist at home and abroad, a fighter always alert for enemy scheming and aggression. His views and actions consistently aligned with the most hawkish elements of the national security establishment, and at no point did RFK exhibit any inclination toward questioning or reflection on the underlying assumptions of such an approach to the Cold War. RFK's instincts in this vein allowed him formulate a prescient analysis he offered to the president just 48 hours into the Bay of Pigs crisis. In fact, the attorney general

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<sup>62</sup> Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, pp. 64-66.

immediately grasped the darkest ramifications of the Bay of Pigs disaster and outlined them in a memo he wrote to JFK.

Castro would become more bombastic, more closely tied to the Soviet Union and more heavily armed than if the Bay of Pigs never happened, RFK told the president. In short, Castro was much more dangerous after the Bay of Pigs than before, when Washington and the American public generally considered the regime in Havana a serious threat. Something forceful and determined must be done, RFK told the president. Perhaps an incident could be staged whereby Cuba appeared to launch attacks at U.S. forces in Guantanamo Bay with Russian MIG fighters, RFK suggested. Then the administration would have cause for a more direct military confrontation with Castro. Whatever was to be done, the attorney general argued, it had to be done soon. The status quo could not be allowed to resume once the crisis faded. Castro could not be left alone. “The time has come for a showdown,” RFK wrote to the president. “For in a year or two years the situation will be vastly worse. If we don’t want Russia to set up missile bases in Cuba, we had better decide now what we are willing to do to stop it.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Memorandum from Attorney General Kennedy to the president, April 19, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. 10, 157.

## II. The Makings of a Wider Role

### Confronting the CIA

The Bay of Pigs left President Kennedy regretting RFK's appointment as head of the Justice Department. "He is wasted there," JFK told Schlesinger. "Bobby should be in CIA... It's a hell of a way to learn things, but I have learned one thing from this business – that is, that we will have to deal with CIA. McNamara has dealt with Defense; Rusk had done a lot with State; but no one has dealt with CIA."<sup>64</sup> JFK aired the thought in conversation amid the crisis, voicing frustration in a moment when the worst of the bad news flooded him. However, the president took the idea of RFK as head of the CIA seriously nonetheless. They talked about it. RFK opposed the idea. Having the president's brother at the head of the agency would look bad, RFK felt. Also, RFK said, the job was no good for a Democrat generally.<sup>65</sup> Still, the CIA was too important for RFK to ignore. The attorney general had to get involved in covert operations if he wanted to serve his brother effectively in the administration. The Bay of Pigs debacle had proven this much to both of them.

In this way RFK began what would become an ever-deepening involvement with the CIA, where he eventually asserted himself as a kind of shadow director for Cuban affairs after the Bay of Pigs. RFK, like the president, had long been an

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<sup>64</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 452.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, p. 58, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program, John F. Kennedy Library.

enthusiast of espionage tales written by the likes of John Buchan and Ian Fleming.<sup>66</sup> The attorney general showed no reverence or romanticism in dealing with the U.S. spy agency in real life, however. From the start RFK approached the CIA with a sense of hostility and suspicion, seeing most of the rank and file essentially as incompetent bureaucrats who had misled the president in a key moment. RFK's dealings with the CIA posed bigger problems than personnel frustrations, however. The CIA's ongoing activities in support of Cuban exiles in the United States amounted in many cases to illegal activity, especially in instances when the spy agency enlisted the help of organized crime figures. The Cuba Project, which paused only for a moment after the Bay of Pigs, remained a hive of militant activity in the United States that clearly contravened U.S. law as governed by treaty obligations under the U.N. Charter as well as the U.S. Neutrality Act.<sup>67</sup> RFK publicly disparaged such legal obligations in the wake of the Bay of Pigs:

First... the neutrality laws are among the oldest laws in our statute books... Clearly they were not designed for the kind of situation which exists in the world today. Second, the neutrality laws were never designed to prevent individuals from leaving the United States to fight for a cause in which they believed. There is nothing in the

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<sup>66</sup> Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, p. 119.

<sup>67</sup> *Nonenforcement of the Neutrality Act: International Law and Foreign Policy Powers under the Constitution*, *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 95, No. 8, pp. 1955-1975, June, 1982.

neutrality laws which prevents refugees from Cuba from returning to that country to engage in the fight for freedom.<sup>68</sup>

A further legal dilemma for the attorney general arose from the fact that the administration's secret war against Castro entailed the cooperation of Mafiosi, spies and Cuban rebels. Government collusion with the underworld flew in the face of RFK's adamant vow to crack down on organized crime. The conflicts of interest presented themselves early and very clearly, but RFK never appeared troubled by them. The imperative to move against Castro seemed to override all other concerns for RFK, and he showed no hesitation in pressing a covert action campaign in Cuba despite the fact that doing so involved considerable illegal activity by the administration. Indeed, the attorney general threw himself into the CIA campaign against Cuba, a move that landed him squarely in the center of the administration's most contentious debates about the threat of communism across the whole of Latin America.

The attorney general got his first real look at the inner workings of the CIA during hearings of the Cuba Study Group, the board of inquiry President Kennedy established to investigate the Bay of Pigs debacle. Retired Gen. Maxwell Taylor headed the commission at the president's personal request. Taylor was supposed to help guide the group toward consensus in a final report. Dulles and Burke took seats on the board as well. The president put them on the commission essentially to

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

prevent persecution of the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But really the attorney general and Taylor drove the probe. Taylor oversaw the inquiry as a venerable former military man, a soldier-scholar who drew respect from the national security establishment and the New Frontier alike. RFK served essentially as chief interrogator and presidential proxy.<sup>69</sup>

CIA men packed the room for the commission's first meeting April 22, when U.S. operations aimed at helping the surviving rebels were still underway off the coast of Cuba. Emotions were raw, and tensions ran high as the board gathered its first witnesses. Many at the CIA and the Pentagon felt that President Kennedy botched the Bay of Pigs. CIA men like Jacob Esterline, the head of the anti-Castro taskforce, believed that relatively unimportant politics kept JFK from ordering vital airstrikes that would have saved the invasion. "We cannot conduct an operation where political decision is going to interfere with military judgment," Esterline said flatly to the board. "My friend," RFK quickly shot back, "you sound like military men have been shouting down the hall."<sup>70</sup> In Esterline's view key men who planned the operation were not heard by the president, pushed from the room as the inner circle of the White House focused on the politics of the situation. As far as RFK was concerned the president had heard the military advice on offer and followed it, which was the problem.

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<sup>69</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, pp. 447-448.

<sup>70</sup> Official History of the Bay of Pigs Operation, Vol. IV: The Taylor Committee Investigation of the Bay of Pigs, pp. 25-30. Available at: [www.foia.cia.gov](http://www.foia.cia.gov).

The subject changed quickly after the sharp exchange between RFK and Esterline. Yet the sentiments behind it colored all of the proceedings, which lasted for roughly six weeks. RFK showed little patience for witnesses who felt the same as Esterline. The only mistake the president made was allowing a stupid CIA plan to go forward in the first place, in RFK's view. The brigade's invasion was doomed, because ultimately the CIA plan hinged on a popular uprising that never had a chance of forming. If Castro's planes were immobilized, so what? The brigade could not hold out indefinitely against Castro's overwhelming ground force. They simply did not have the numbers. And Castro proved ruthlessly effective at squelching any internal dissent that might have arisen to embrace the rebels. The CIA men had based their plan on a dream scenario and pressed ahead in an almost delusional fashion in the face of easily visible realities. They believed their plot could be kept secret even after the cover was blown. They believed a resistance force inside Cuba would arise even though none existed. It was fantasy. Why anyone at the Pentagon or the White House believed them was the real question. "How could I have been so stupid?" JFK said again and again in the days afterward.<sup>71</sup> Outwardly the president took full responsibility, but RFK and others in the White House ultimately blamed the CIA. The commission's proceedings, and RFK's role in them, essentially put the CIA on notice. The president was going to deal with the CIA, as he believed he must. JFK's method of dealing with the CIA was to give the attorney general full license to

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, p. 367.

examine its activities as a presidential proxy and control them when necessary. This was the implicit mandate RFK carried after the commission came to a close.

The agency's failings in Cuba went beyond the bloody disaster on the beach in Cuba, RFK learned. Early in the proceedings the attorney general heard probably for the first time that the CIA had hired mobsters to assassinate Castro. Bissell told RFK some of the details and mentioned a name familiar to the attorney general, Sam Giancana, a notorious Chicago Mafioso.<sup>72</sup> RFK and Giancana had faced off during congressional hearings in June of 1959 probing connections between organized labor and the Mafia. Giancana appeared as a witness on Capitol Hill, snickering and sneering as RFK questioned him as a Senate counsel. RFK got nothing from Giancana, who gleefully pled the Fifth Amendment over and over again. "Would you tell us anything about your operations or will you just giggle every time I ask you a question," Kennedy asked Giancana. "I decline to answer because I honestly believe my answer might tend to incriminate me," Giancana said. "I thought only little girls giggled, Mr. Giancana," RFK growled.<sup>73</sup> The bit of melodrama was little more than a footnote to RFK's time as a Senate counsel, coming shortly before he left to run his brother's White House campaign. But Giancana and RFK would remain connected in ways that surprised both in following years.

Giancana got involved with the CIA in the fall of 1960, when he met private detective Robert Maheu. A former FBI agent, Maheu regularly worked for the CIA,

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<sup>72</sup> Memo from Hoover to RFK, May 22, 1961. JFK Assassination Records, FBI files, Record No. 124-10216-10055.

<sup>73</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 165.

doing various spook jobs deemed too risky for formal agency employees in the United States.<sup>74</sup> Maheu had also developed friendly contacts within the criminal underworld through his detective work. Now the CIA wanted introductions from Maheu. The idea came from Bissell and CIA Director of Security Sheffield Edwards. They figured that mobsters with gambling interests chased from Cuba by Castro might harbor the motivation for action against the revolutionary leader and possibly hold some useful connections on the island.<sup>75</sup> They were right. Many organized crime figures craved revenge against Castro. With Castro gone things might again look like the good old days of Havana in the 1950s, when gambling syndicates and their attendant mobsters based in the United States used Cuba as a libidinous carnival. Also, working with the U.S. government against Castro allowed the Mafia to hold out hope for an easing of the pressure they had felt in recent years from federal authorities. Hoover's FBI had in the late 1950s, slowly and grudgingly, begun to focus on the neglected issue of organized crime. Crusaders like RFK had helped stir FBI action, much to the Mafia's frustration.

Bissell shared few specifics with RFK about Giancana's connections to the CIA when the matter first surfaced in the Cuba Study Group. The attorney general learned more from Hoover around the same time, however, because one of Giancana's associates, Arthur Balletti, got arrested while trying to install a tap on a phone in Las Vegas. Maheu and Edwards scrambled to bail out Balletti, who was

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<sup>74</sup> Church Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, interim report, Nov. 20, 1975, p. 74.

<sup>75</sup> Church Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, interim report, Nov. 20, 1975, p. 74.

doing a chore for Giancana when he got caught. Edwards was forced to explain to the FBI that Giancana was on a mission for the CIA. Edwards told FBI officials that Giancana had launched several plots to eliminate Castro before the Bay of Pigs, but none of them had worked out. Giancana had several more schemes in the works as of late May 1961, Edwards said, and those could eventually pay off.<sup>76</sup> The details were still somewhat hazy when Hoover shared them with the attorney general, but RFK understood enough for the important facts to be clear. The CIA was using underworld figures to assassinate Castro, and the mobsters involved in the effort were not to be touched by the FBI.

Passes from U.S. law enforcement had become routine for the Cuban exiles and their supporters plotting against Castro before the Bay of Pigs. Those working inside the United States to bring down Castro had been involved in a variety of illegal activities -- buying and stashing weapons, recruiting and fundraising for their shadow army, entering the country illegally and so on. Troubles arose as the exiles and their American allies inevitably encountered the Coast Guard, local police, the FBI and the Immigration and Nationalization Service. The CIA eased their way, quietly explaining whenever necessary how the exiles were essential to national security and could not be hindered.<sup>77</sup> Hoover, who considered himself a ferocious anti-

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<sup>76</sup> Memo from Hoover to RFK, May 22, 1961. JFK Assassination Records, FBI files, Record No. 124-10216-10055.

<sup>77</sup> FBI memorandum on anti-Castro activities in the United States, March 26, 1963, JFK Assassination Records, FBI Files, NARA Record No. 124-90107-10283. Part of this memo offered an overview of longstanding FBI practices regarding Cuban exiles, which became increasingly untenable in 1963 as many exile groups grew more brazen in their illegal activities.

communist, was the last to object to a covert operation targeting Castro. He gladly played along, content to be included in the secret.

RFK offered no objection to the CIA's work with the Mafia. As ever, the imperative to act against Castro clearly overrode all other considerations, including matters of legality. But RFK ordered the chief of his organized crime task force to look into the Balletti case nonetheless. Who was Balletti? What exactly was his connection to Giancana? And why was he tapping a phone in Las Vegas, where the intended target seemed to be comedian Dan Rowan, one of the guys who would later star in the goofball television show *Laugh-In*? It made little sense. Even Edwards claimed not to know. Giancana's work against Castro did not involve phone taps, Edwards said.<sup>78</sup> Ultimately, though, the matter was unimportant to RFK when compared to threat posed by Castro. Did it really matter why the Mafia was secretly listening to whatever banalities and unpolished jokes Dan Rowan likely shared over the telephone if nuclear weapons from the Soviet Union appeared in Cuba?

### **Working with the Mafia**

Giancana was not the only mobster working with the CIA. In fact he had become involved incidentally. The first mobster Maheu and the CIA approached was John Rosselli, the Chicago Mafia's overseer of operations in Los Angeles since the mid 1930s.<sup>79</sup> Maheu was supposed to adopt the standard CIA cover in reaching out to

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<sup>78</sup> Memo from Hoover to RFK, May 22, 1961. JFK Assassination Records, FBI files, Record No. 124-10216-10055.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas Reppetto, *American Mafia*, pp. 203-205.

Rosselli, posing as a representative of businessmen out for Castro's blood over losses dealt to them in the wake of the Cuban revolution. Maheu abandoned the charade when he met Rosselli face to face at the Brown Derby in Beverly Hills in early September 1960. Maheu simply told Rosselli that the U.S. government wanted Castro dead and hoped he could help by recruiting Cubans willing to do the job. Rosselli hesitated. He insisted on talking directly to someone in the government. Maheu then arranged a meeting between Rosselli and a CIA case officer at the Plaza Hotel in New York in mid September, when Castro was in the city for a visit to the United Nations. From then on Rosselli understood the CIA's involvement and agreed to cooperate. Soon Rosselli was in Miami searching for murderous Cubans with help from Giancana and a senior Florida Mafioso also brought into the plot, Santo Trafficante.<sup>80</sup> The three mobsters met regularly with Maheu, who kept the CIA up to date on what Rosselli, Giancana and Trafficante said they were doing. Whether the three mobsters actually did anything at all remains unclear.

Trafficante for one thought the idea of the three of them orchestrating Castro's assassination was ludicrous. He knew how formidable Castro was from firsthand experience. When Castro took power Trafficante was running several lavish Havana casinos, whose coffers directly supported the despised Batista regime. Castro marked Trafficante and other casino operators for death, and Trafficante barely escaped a firing squad before fleeing to his home in Florida.<sup>81</sup> Trafficante understood well that

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<sup>80</sup> Church Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, interim report, Nov. 20, 1975, pp. 75-77.

<sup>81</sup> Frank Ragano, *Mob Lawyer*, pp. 51-65.

three Mafia toughs were no match for Castro and his legions of bearded revolutionaries. “I looked at Johnny and I thought he must be some kind of idiot to believe that somebody could just go down there and kill Castro,” Trafficante told his longtime lawyer, Frank Ragano.<sup>82</sup> But Rosselli was eager to try anyway. The CIA had offered Rosselli money, about \$150,000, a fair sum in those days.<sup>83</sup> But it was not really about the money. U.S. authorities had been trying to deport Rosselli for years. That would go away if he helped kill Castro, Rosselli told Trafficante. Not only that, but the Justice Department would get off their backs if they did the CIA this favor.<sup>84</sup>

A typical mob assassin used a gun at close range or even a knife. Anyone attempting that against Castro might beat the odds and succeed in killing him, but he would never leave alive. Whoever the mobsters sent would be on a suicide mission. “You have anybody like that?” Trafficante asked Giancana and Rosselli.<sup>85</sup> They did not, but the CIA had another option for them. The idea of poisoning Castro had been around the CIA for a while. The agency got a box of Castro’s favorite cigars in August of 1960 and laced them with a poison potent enough to kill anyone who simply put one in their mouth. The CIA gave the cigars to someone they hoped would pass them to Castro in February of 1961, but nothing came of it.<sup>86</sup> Now with their three Mafiosi the CIA proposed using poison pills. CIA technicians developed

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>83</sup> Church Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, interim report, Nov. 20, 1975, p. 75.

<sup>84</sup> Frank Ragano, *Mob Lawyer*, p. 209.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Church Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, interim report, Nov. 20, 1975, p. 73.

pills that could be slipped into food. CIA lab hands tested the pills on monkeys successfully and passed a batch to mobsters in Miami around February of 1961. Where the pills went after that is a mystery. The mobsters told the CIA that they had given the pills to a Cuban government official, a defector in Castro's midst who agreed to poison his food. But the Cuban official got cold feet and backed out of the plot. The Mafiosi trio promised the CIA that they would try again. This time the poison pills were given to a Cuban exile supposedly able to access the kitchen of a restaurant frequented by Castro. Again, nothing came of it, and the CIA was left unclear why the plot had failed.<sup>87</sup> Did this Cuban get cold feet too? Had Castro stopped going to the restaurant? Was there some sort of mix-up in the secret signals sent to green light the attempt? They did not know. The CIA men only knew what the mobsters told them. That was part of the idea behind having mobsters do the dirty work. In any event, Castro clearly lived.

Anyone wanting to kill Castro in early 1961 had to get in line. Those with cause to seek Castro's death included the CIA, casino magnates with Mafia ties, Batista regime remnants, disenchanting Cuban revolutionaries and Latin American leaders fearful of Castro's designs for the region. Castro understood this better than anyone and vigilantly oversaw internal security matters, especially his own personal safety. He surrounded himself with loyalists wholly dedicated to keeping him alive, knowing that his list of enemies grew more numerous and determined as he consolidated power after the revolution. Castro early on proved himself to be

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<sup>87</sup> Church Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, interim report, Nov. 20, 1975, pp. 79-82.

cunning and ruthless in ensuring his own survival. He never lost his edge in that regard, and he instilled the same flintiness among his many security forces. Would-be assassins after Castro had to evade scores of spies, secret police and bodyguards.<sup>88</sup> Three Mafia goons in Miami were no match against Castro in his Havana citadel, not even with CIA poison pills.

The three mobsters probably made little or no effort to kill Castro. Trafficante claimed to have swindled the agency in the affair. “The CIA had all this foolish talk about poisoning Castro,” Trafficante said some years afterward. “Those crazy people. They gave me some pills to kill Castro. I just flushed them down the toilet. Nothing ever came of it. We didn’t expect to make any money but we had a windfall. They paid us a lot of money and nobody intended to do a damn thing.”<sup>89</sup> Trafficante was right about Castro even if Rosselli wanted to believe otherwise. The Cuban leader was without question a fearsome man with a talent for destroying his many enemies, and his reach only grew longer after the revolution. Attempting to kill Castro was at best foolish, and Trafficante was no fool. He was the only one among the three plotters to live out his days. Giancana and Rosselli were both brutally murdered in the 1970s.

The scheme seemed shockingly sinister when revealed years later through congressional inquiries into CIA activities, but at the time it was a small affair compared to everything else the CIA hurled at Castro. While the 2506 Brigade

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<sup>88</sup> Juan Antonio Rodriguez Menier, “Inside of the Minint,” writings 1991-1993. Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University. Menier, a Cuban defector, wrote a valuable insider’s account of how Castro created highly effective security forces.

<sup>89</sup> Frank Ragano, *Mob Lawyer*, p. 209.

trained in Guatemala, the agency waged what can only be described as a terrorism campaign inside Cuba. From October of 1960 to April of 1961 CIA saboteurs torched 300,000 tons of sugar cane in some 800 fires they set targeting an economic resource that provided a livelihood for thousands of Cuban civilians. Arsonists sent by the CIA also burned 42 tobacco warehouses, two paper plants, one sugar refinery, two dairies, four stores and 21 homes of communists. A bombing campaign spread further destruction and fear in the same months. More than a hundred explosions ripped through communist party offices, railroad stations, bus terminals and militia barracks, among other targets. Additionally about 200 so-called nuisance bombs rattled the Havana area. Guerrillas derailed half a dozen trains and plunged neighborhoods into darkness by bringing down multiple power transformers. At one point the CIA brazenly sent commandos ashore in an amphibious raid aimed at destroying an oil refinery.<sup>90</sup> The CIA's paramilitary machinery ran at full tilt against Castro when the mobsters started their desultory plotting in Miami. Trafficante, Rosselli and Giancana were little more than a few crooked arrows in the vast arsenal the CIA wielded against Castro. Sending underworld figures after the Cuban leader ultimately represented a small bet for the CIA in the overall scheme of things. Maybe they would beat the odds and succeed. If they got and killed by Castro, who cared? Yet the fact that the CIA utilized the Mafia meant that RFK necessarily stepped into the intrigue as he forcefully asserted himself on Cuba within the CIA. A lack archival evidence due to classifications prevents a full understanding of RFK's awareness of

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<sup>90</sup> Memo on paramilitary action against Cuba, May 5, 1961, CIA/CREST, pp. 8-9.

or possible involvement in the CIA's dealings with mobsters. RFK may or may not have known about the extent of the CIA's connections to organized crime while he was attorney general. What archival evidence does show, however, is that RFK personally sought to use the CIA to make connections with organized crime, which is discussed later.<sup>91</sup> Thus if RFK did know about the CIA's relationship with the Mafia, he likely condoned or tacitly accepted it. In any case, publically the three Mafiosi remained priority targets for the Justice Department in RFK's vow to pursue organized crime, while secretly the trio mingled with the administration's allies against Castro.

### **New Powers for the Attorney General**

President Kennedy wasted no time in showing that RFK held broadened authority on Cuba policy within the White House. JFK gathered senior officials in the Cabinet Room April 22 to discuss what actions should be taken on Cuba going forward from the Bay of Pigs. Normally such a meeting would involve only officials dealing directly with foreign policy, but RFK joined nonetheless. The president opened by saying the time had come to move past the Bay of Pigs and focus on work ahead. Cuban rebels in touch with the United States should be advised to lie low for the time being, the president said, but that could change as conditions permitted. Looking at the bigger picture, Castro appeared stronger than ever in the afterglow of his victory. The president and all others around the table at the White House feared an

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<sup>91</sup> Sam Halpern, in recorded interview with Brian Latell and Michael Warner for CIA internal history, April 7, 1998, JFK Assassination Records, CIA Misc., Record No. 104-10324-10000.

emboldened Castro would be tempted to launch subversive activities against Latin American countries and perhaps even within the United States. JFK ordered the attorney general to work closely with the CIA director to more effectively root out any Castro operatives in the United States.<sup>92</sup> The president's directives were quite vague, and he did not spell out specific new powers for RFK in that meeting beyond saying RFK should work with the CIA more closely against Castro on the domestic front. But JFK's inclusion of the attorney general in high-level talks about Cuba served as another implicit message to the most senior administration officials, i.e. RFK henceforth would play a central, if undefined, role on Cuba policy.

No attorney general had played such a role before, but then no attorney general had been brother to the president. Yet for RFK, being involved in a major foreign policy issue seemed natural. Being involved in any important issue JFK faced seemed natural. At difficult moments, JFK reached out to RFK for advice and support. JFK had done so for many years, and the brothers had faced a great number of travails together in this way.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, once in the White House, JFK highly valued RFK's ability to accomplish tasks effectively. "He has this terrific executive energy," JFK said of RFK during a discussion in 1963 with Ben Bradlee. "We've got more guys around here with ideas. The problem is to get things done. Bobby's the best organizer I've ever seen."<sup>94</sup> JFK used RFK as more than a taskmaster handling high priority projects such as Cuba, however. The president relied on the attorney to

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<sup>92</sup> National Security Council Record of Action April 22, 1961, Box 313, Presidential Papers, National Security Files, John F. Kennedy Library. DI: JFKNSF-313-005.

<sup>93</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, pp. 64-65, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>94</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, pp. 598-599.

give blunt counseling on a range of issues, trusting always that RFK held the president's interests foremost in mind when other administration officials perhaps would not. JFK also used RFK as a kind of militant alter ego, especially at the CIA. RFK eagerly embraced these roles throughout his time in the Kennedy administration handling matters ranging from cabinet selection to civil rights.<sup>95</sup> Working on Cuba combined them all.

Both the president and the attorney general mulled ideas about reform for the CIA as the Cuba Study Group wound down its hearings. The board had focused almost exclusively on the operational failures of the Bay of Pigs, but the president felt the organization as a whole needed changes. JFK asked Schlesinger for policy suggestions along these lines. Schlesinger said that covert operations needed tighter controls. Every planning team for future such missions, Schlesinger argued, probably ought to have "an official son-of-a-bitch – a man charged with raising every question, forcing every objection, and picking every hole before a decision is finally made."<sup>96</sup> Schlesinger outlined a number of other ideas on how to integrate CIA plans and operations more seamlessly with the rest of the national security bureaucracy. But his notion about an overseer for covert operations meshed with the emerging sentiments of the president and the attorney general, who also contemplated Schlesinger's policy guidance. The attorney general might not be able to lead the CIA, but he could certainly be the official son-of-a-bitch for covert operations.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Schlesinger to the president and attorney general, May 18, 1961, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

Cuba remained the administration's top target for covert operations. President Kennedy and the attorney general stayed committed to overthrowing Castro, despite all the fallout from the Bay of Pigs. National security imperatives as perceived by the president and RFK drove the administration's thinking and actions. Castro had to go, because Cuba might become a Soviet missile base, a hub for communist subversion in Latin America, a launching pad for cover communist activities within the United States or all three. At various points both RFK and JFK stressed the threat of all three of these potential scenarios, which in their minds was sufficient reason for immediate aggressions against Castro. How Castro might be brought down remained unclear in the summer of 1961, but RFK and others at the White House grew increasingly determined to find a way. By early May the White House national security team all agreed that the administration must act against Castro.<sup>97</sup> However, the general strategic calculation about Cuba was the same after the Bay of Pigs as it was before, i.e. Castro could not be attacked directly without grave risk of war with the Soviet Union. That left covert operations as the instrument for overthrow, but prospects along those lines were bleaker than ever. Castro's internal security forces had thoroughly swept the island in the wake of the invasion, arresting thousands. The crackdown left the CIA with only about a dozen active agents in Cuba. The Cuban opposition on the island had scattered as well. Only one group numbering about 100 fighters in the Escambray Mountains was thought to be active as a guerrilla force. All other rebels escaping arrest were back in their homes biding time, and their numbers

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<sup>97</sup> Record of Actions at the 483<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, May 5, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. X, 205.

were small. Dormant insurgents connected to exile outfits totaled less than 700.<sup>98</sup> Still, the CIA had Cuban exiles leaders in the United States willing to try, notably Manuel Ray Rivero, head of a rebel group called the Revolutionary Movement of the People, or MRP. Ray had already asked the CIA for five boats, money and miscellaneous other materials so that MRP operatives could take up intelligence and sabotage operations inside Cuba.<sup>99</sup> Ray wanted to keep up the fight against Castro and get started right away.

At best Ray and other Cuban exiles willing to throw themselves at Castro could hope to mount only dozens of sabotage missions with no real prospect of shaking Castro's hold on power. The Cuban exiles could be a nuisance to Castro but nothing more. There seemed to be little point in spending time, money and blood on risky missions certain to leave Castro unbowed. But the president and the attorney general pressed for action nonetheless. In National Security Council meetings RFK led the call and flashed anger toward anyone who seemed hesitant. Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles, a frequent participant in national security meetings on Cuba, took minutes at a meeting with RFK and JFK shortly after the Bay of Pigs and described it this way:

There were some thirty-five people at the NSC meeting on Cuba.

Again Bob Kennedy was present, and took the lead as at the previous

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<sup>98</sup> Memo for the Special Group, "Internal Action Operations against Cuba," July 25, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vols. X/XI/XII microfiche supplement, 270.

<sup>99</sup> Memorandum from the Assistant to the Deputy Director (Plans) for Cover Action (Barnes) to the Director of Central Intelligence Dulles, May 3, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. X, 197.

meeting, slamming into anyone who suggested that we go slowly and try to move calmly and not repeat previous mistakes. The atmosphere was almost as emotional as the Cabinet meeting two days earlier, the difference being that on this occasion the emphasis was on specific proposals to harass Castro... The president limited himself largely to asking questions—questions, however, which led in one direction.<sup>100</sup>

Such scenes became familiar to the White House hands dealing with Cuba. The president would coolly preside over a meeting with the formal National Security Council or one of the many other administration teams working on Cuba while the attorney general unleashed his temper and demanded action. RFK called for nothing short of a relentless campaign against Castro, and anyone who sat through a meeting with him and the president understood that the two brothers spoke with one mind on the issue. RFK embodied a wrathful urgency the president and the attorney general both felt toward Castro.

By mid May, responding to pressure from the White House, the CIA developed a plan for renewed covert operations in Cuba. The Cuban Revolutionary Council, acting as an umbrella organization for various rebel groups, would be the main organization receiving U.S. backing. At the same time the agency would work with other Cuban exile groups like Ray's, regardless of their relationship with the council. The CIA would, in short, start spreading its bets against Castro. The targets

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<sup>100</sup> Chester Bowles, Notes on the 478<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, April 22, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. X, 166.

for exile sabotage operations would be the same as before the Bay of Pigs – refineries, power plants, bridges, radio and television stations, sugar production facilities and the like.<sup>101</sup> The basic idea was to keep chipping away at Castro’s powerbase with rebel attacks until something bigger could happen. Perhaps, under pressure, Castro would blunder and launch an outright attack on a Latin American country or even the United States, inviting a U.S. invasion. Maybe the appearance of internal dissent created by covert operations would lead to mass defections, hollowing out Castro’s regime. The sabotage campaign in effect hinged on an unknowable future event or circumstances taking shape, some scenario in which Castro’s hold on power suddenly slipped. The covert operations proposed by the CIA were supposed to instill a sense of mayhem that would help in some murky way bring about such a moment. And if that moment never came? Then there was just senseless mayhem in Cuba, a prospect that appeared to raise little concern in the White House. At least mayhem was action, and it cost the United States little so long as Cuban exiles were willing to hurl themselves into the fray.

As before, the CIA kept RFK apprised of happenings in Cuba with daily intelligence briefs, which swelled files in the attorney general’s office. News of the blasts and the blazes unleashed by the CIA had filled the intelligence summaries in the weeks ahead of the April invasion. In the months afterward the CIA briefs reaching the attorney general painted an increasingly dark picture on the island.

Castro indeed felt emboldened – and enraged. Weapons from the communist bloc

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<sup>101</sup> Program of Covert Action Aimed at Weakening the Castro Regime, May 19, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. X, 223.

poured into Cuba while Castro tightened his grip on the country, rounding up and executing suspected subversives with firing squads. In public Castro thundered against the United States in speech after speech, denouncing and hectoring Washington. Other leading Cuban figures such as Guevara and Raul Castro voiced up too, echoing their leader. Taken together political rhetoric coming from Havana seemed all about revolution in the region, austerity in Cuba, strengthened ties with the Soviet Union and unbridled hatred for America.<sup>102</sup> How much RFK absorbed from the copious intelligence materials sent to him by CIA is unclear. The reports show no signs of notations from the attorney general. But the bleak picture they presented of Cuba meshed generally with perceptions of Cuba RFK voiced repeatedly in meetings and memos. RFK's sense of the threat Castro's Cuba posed on the whole aligned with the intelligence assessments generated repeatedly by the CIA during the Kennedy administration, which tended to take an alarmist view.

The fears RFK and the White House generally felt regarding Castro's reach within Latin America were well founded and had arisen even before the Bay of Pigs. The CIA had watched with alarm as Castro made his opening moves in the region once in power. In June of 1959, more than 200 guerrillas trained and backed by Castro landed in the Dominican Republic hoping to launch a revolution there. The fighters came from Cuba via two boats and a transport plane and included a number of Cuban officers as well as Dominican exiles opposed to right-wing dictator General

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<sup>102</sup> See box 201, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library. The dozens of intelligence briefs here offer a mix of news summaries and intelligence snippets.

Rafael Trujillo.<sup>103</sup> The insurrection failed. Trujillo's forces wiped out the rebels in just a few days, but the operation revealed the depth of Castro's audaciousness and ambition. As far as the CIA was concerned, Castro had a vision for revolution across Latin America and was committed to pursuing it.

Castro's revolution had been only the most vivid manifestation of political currents that ran deeply throughout Latin America. A genuine grassroots reform crusade had taken root in the region during the postwar period. A great many people wanted to see an old political order swept away. For generations politics throughout Latin America tended to pit military and political elites against a largely agrarian underclass in a competition for economic privilege. Backed by Washington and American businesses, the elites won more often than not. In 1959, Castro showed people how that could change in a stroke.<sup>104</sup> Revolution could be had if only people were bold enough. Latin America was ripe for change. This was what Castro and his revolutionaries preached, and few doubted their resolve to wage a campaign beyond Cuba. The CIA estimated that only eight sitting governments in Latin America were solidly against Castro and Castroism as of 1961. In most countries across the region leading officials felt wary or outright fearful of leftist blocs in their countries and hesitated to speak or act against them.<sup>105</sup> Castro, his backers and his enemies all

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<sup>103</sup> CIA, "Situations Involving a Potential for Resort to Sustained Internal Violence," March 30, 1961, CIA/Crest.

<sup>104</sup> Westad, the *Global Cold War*, pp. 143-152. Also see Timothy Wickham-Crowley's *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America* for a deeper look at postwar revolutionary politics in the region.

<sup>105</sup> CIA, "Attitudes of Other Latin American Governments toward Cuba," Feb. 13, 1961, CIA/CREST.

sensed violent upheaval in the middle distance, and after the Bay of Pigs the odds seemed to favor Castro in many people's eyes.

RFK worried especially about Castro's revolution spreading beyond Cuba. The attorney general wanted to find out from American embassies and military missions throughout Latin America how strong the military and police forces were in countries susceptible to revolutionary politics, and he urged the president to order a study of the matter in a memo dated May 22, 1961. "It would be helpful, I think, to find out from our Embassy and Military Personnel in all these countries the capabilities of the police and of the Army to determine: 1.) Violence, insurrection and guerrillas. 2.) How much training has taken place in the field of special forces."<sup>106</sup> If bands of guerrillas backed by Castro appeared in Bolivia, Venezuela or some other country, who would put them down? RFK wanted to know. Thus contemplating the threat of Castro had led RFK to grow increasingly concerned about the security of Latin America as a whole, taking the attorney general ever deeper into the Cold War. To be sure, a basic, if dubious, assumption that Castro was indeed a threat to the security of Latin America underpinned the thinking of RFK and JFK. Neither of the Kennedy brothers showed any willingness to challenge that assumption, even though Castro's ambitions and rhetoric clearly went beyond his actual abilities to bring about revolutionary change in the region. Events helped reinforce the sense of menace the Kennedy brothers adopted toward Castro, however.

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<sup>106</sup> RFK to JFK, May 22, 1961, Box 242, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

The first crisis in Latin America after the Bay of Pigs materialized swiftly, in the same place Castro had struck in 1959. Trujillo, the ruler of the Dominican Republic for three decades, was losing his grip on power by 1961. Trujillo's long, brutal reign had given rise to many enemies inside the Dominican Republic and throughout Latin America. The dictator had been a reliable U.S. ally in the region in times past, and Washington had long been happy to look the other way when it came to his regime's abuses. But Trujillo's oppression and malfeasance had grown so egregious by the late 1950s that even the Eisenhower administration felt that dictator should go. The sentiment passed to the new administration, and in mid May 1961 Dominican dissidents reached out to U.S. officials saying a plot to kill Trujillo was afoot. They wanted arms, recognition and general U.S. support.<sup>107</sup> Consul General Henry Dearborn was serving as CIA station chief at the time in Ciudad Trujillo, the Dominican capital. In response to the request the CIA gave the oppositionists three pistols, four machine guns and some ammunition to further their plot.<sup>108</sup> Trujillo's enemies did not really need the weapons; many were military men with easy access to arms. The covert aid from the United States was little more than a gesture to the opposition, a signal that Washington welcomed the demise of its onetime ally and would not stand in their way.

RFK got involved with the issue when he heard rumors about the intrigue in Ciudad Trujillo. In late May of 1961, Attorney General Kennedy discussed the

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<sup>107</sup> Chester Bowles, "Notes on Crisis Involving the Dominican Republic," June 3, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, V. XII, 310.

<sup>108</sup> Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, pp. 197-199.

matter in person with Dulles. Then he called the president, who said he knew nothing about a coming assassination attempt. Nonetheless the brothers agreed that a task force should be formed to figure out what the U.S. response would be if Trujillo suddenly fell. RFK, the president and other White House officials monitoring the situation generally were ambivalent about whether Trujillo should stay or go. The foremost concern for RFK was what should be done if Trujillo fell.<sup>109</sup> And soon the dictator indeed did. On the evening of May 30, shortly before midnight, Trujillo was driving in his limousine just outside the capital when his assassins struck. Eight gunmen traveling in three cars forced Trujillo off the road and opened fire, killing him. Dulles called RFK as news reports about the assassination began to circulate and kept him abreast of what little the CIA knew in the immediate hours after the killing. Despite the CIA contact with dissidents, the intelligence agency could shed no light on whether Trujillo's killers held popular support or even who in fact they were. RFK seemed largely indifferent to Trujillo's bloody demise but annoyed that the CIA had so little information about a potential crisis as it unfolded. In notes made at the time RFK wrote:

We still don't know how much popular support this anti-Trujillo group has. We don't know who is involved in it; we have at the present time no contact of any kind with them; we haven't received a report from the consul indicating that he has any contact with them... The great

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<sup>109</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, pp. 490-491.

problem now is that we don't know what to do because we don't know what the situation is.<sup>110</sup>

President Kennedy was in Paris preparing for a Vienna summit with Khrushchev when news of Trujillo's assassination arrived. RFK was back in Washington, and the Kennedy brothers discussed the situation by phone. No archival evidence reveals the details of their conversation, but in any case RFK ended the call with the president understanding that he had the responsibility of ensuring that the administration took the necessary action to prevent the Dominican Republic from falling to communists. And in RFK's view no one in the administration was moving aggressively enough.<sup>111</sup> The contingency planning done to date aimed to craft a plan of action meant to prevent communist takeover of the country if Trujillo's removal produced a power vacuum. Remembering the episode years later during an interview, RFK said: "And the big question was, when Trujillo was assassinated, who was going to take over the country. And that was my concern."<sup>112</sup> Even before the Bay of Pigs the CIA had warned that the Dominican Republic could fall into turmoil at almost any moment because the Trujillo regime had grown so intolerable, creating an opportunity for Castro. According to CIA estimates, the oppositionists were mostly upper class and thus unlikely to join forces with communists in effort to bring down Trujillo. But at the same time Castro had cards to play if he wanted. The CIA

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<sup>110</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, pp. 491-492.

<sup>111</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, April 13, 1964, p. 178, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

figured Castro could in short order dispatch several hundred revolutionaries to the Dominican Republic, in effect repeating the move Cuban revolutionaries made on the country in 1959. That was about all Castro could hope to do, according to the CIA.<sup>113</sup> The timing of Trujillo's death so soon after the Bay of Pigs made the situation seem more dangerous to the Kennedy brothers, however.

Castro loomed in the minds of the president and the attorney general as they contemplated how to respond to the situation in the Dominican Republic. Cuba was such a small country – yet caused such large problems. The Dominican Republic threatened to do the same if communists seized it, RFK felt. Communist control of the Dominican Republic could prompt a domino fall in the Caribbean. Neighboring Haiti would likely be the next nation to swing into alignment with Castro in RFK's mind. From there the specter of Castro's revolutionary politics sweeping the region grew ever more ominous. Reflecting on the issue during an interview, RFK said: “You see a little country like Cuba, the problems and the trouble it caused, and if he [Castro] had the Dominican Republic... And then it meant really the whole part of the Caribbean would be hard to hold, and so that was the major concern.”<sup>114</sup>

The administration's Dominican Republic crisis team assembled at the State Department, and RFK joined in an unofficial capacity but believing he served as the president's proxy nonetheless. The meetings made for high drama. Calls flew back and forth between the group at State Department and the president's entourage in

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<sup>113</sup> CIA, “Situations Involving a Potential for Resort to Sustained Internal Violence,” March 30, 1961, CIA/CREST.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, April 13, 1964, p. 182, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program, John F. Kennedy Library.

Paris. Intelligence cables flashed to Washington from Ciudad Trujillo as the policymakers tried to figure out what was happening on the ground in the Dominican Republic and what they ought to do. Richard Goodwin, a presidential confidant and key advisor on Latin America, joined RFK along with Schlesinger. Vice President Johnson took part in the talks, as did Rusk, McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lemnitzer. The questions on the table before them all were weighty indeed. Was a bloodbath about to erupt in Ciudad Trujillo? Would the communists swoop in and take the place amid the turmoil? Should the administration land American forces in the Dominican Republic?

RFK and the White House contingent wanted quick action to ensure that the upheaval offered no opportunity for a communist takeover.<sup>115</sup> The attorney general wanted U.S. Navy ships to be positioned off the coast of the Dominican Republic in preparation for sending troops ashore. Bowles, the most senior State Department official at the meeting and ostensibly the chairman of the meeting, expressed some hesitation along with others from the department. RFK berated him, calling Bowles a gutless bastard.<sup>116</sup> To Bowles, RFK seemed to be looking for an excuse to storm the place with American troops. At one point in the talks RFK suggested blowing up the American consulate in the Dominican Republic as a way to give U.S. forces a reason to intervene, an early display of his consistent willingness to contemplate extreme, even outlandish, covert actions. Another idea discussed by RFK and others eager for

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<sup>115</sup> Memo from Schlesinger to RFK, June 3, 1961, Box 206, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>116</sup> David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, p. 70.

military action was to encourage Dominican dissidents to issue an appeal for U.S. intervention, giving diplomatic cover for the landing of U.S. forces. RFK was hardly alone in his zealotry. Goodwin argued in the same vein. McNamara and Schlesinger also agreed with the attorney general and Goodwin to the dismay of Bowles, who along with other State Department officials that felt a drastic U.S. military move on the Dominican Republic was reckless.<sup>117</sup> The White House seemed to want action for action's sake. And RFK led the call, clearly seeing himself as a kind of White House whip to the broader administration.

In the end the immediate imbroglio actually passed quickly, and the White House stayed its hand. Trujillo's son Ramfis assumed political control in Ciudad Trujillo alongside the regime's figurehead president, Joaquin Balaguer. By June 2, the CIA was reporting that the elder Trujillo's death had in fact not altered the near-term political picture all that much. The regime seemed able to carry on fine without the old man. No organized opposition came forth. Trujillo's assassins looked to be simply killers, not usurpers. For the time being things appeared relatively stable in the eyes of the CIA. But agency analysts felt certain that trouble would come eventually. Major upheaval would grip the Dominican Republic sooner or later, analysts said. The regime's continued reliance on a police state to maintain power would stoke an already smoldering opposition movement within the country, and a power struggle would likely ensue. Castro would almost certainly try to shape events to his advantage, the CIA believed. Outright attack with the Cuban military or a

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<sup>117</sup> Chester Bowles, "Notes on Crisis Involving the Dominican Republic," June 3, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, V. XII, 310.

revolutionary guerrilla force would likely be too bold a move given the risk of reprisal from the United States or other Latin American countries. But Castro could stir up communist subversives in the country in the future.<sup>118</sup> The crisis had passed, but the threat remained. For RFK, one of the immediate takeaways from the episode was a further sense of frustration and disappointment with the CIA. The attorney general felt the CIA should have had more information and done a better job of getting it to Washington. And RFK found that acting himself in the face of what looked to him like CIA incompetence produced results. In an oral history interview, RFK said:

You couldn't tell what was going on in the country. And the CIA had some people there, but they couldn't get any information out. Then I finally found out a newspaperman had gone in and landed and was reporting out, so I suggested, why didn't they telephone? And they... put a dime in the telephone and they called down there and got right through. We had all kinds of things like that.<sup>119</sup>

The president returned to Washington after his Vienna summit and met with the members of the Dominican Republic crisis team, including Attorney General Kennedy. They debated what the policy going forward should be. RFK said the new

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<sup>118</sup> "Short-term Prospects in the Dominican Republic," June 2, 1961, CIA/CREST.

<sup>119</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, April 13, 1964, p. 179, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program, John F. Kennedy Library.

leadership ought to have a chance to prove itself.<sup>120</sup> As far as RFK understood, Trujillo's son Ramfis offered assurances that he would undertake internal reforms, eliminate domestic threats to the regime and then fade from the scene to make way for elections. RFK felt the administration had to play along with these promises, however dubious, because few viable alternatives existed.<sup>121</sup> And that is essentially what the policy became, waiting and seeing. The attorney general from then on made it his business to be among the most careful watchers of events in the tiny country. A steady stream of intelligence reports, diplomatic cables and memoranda related to the Dominican Republic began flowing his way at the Justice Department, deepening his activities in foreign affairs and thickening his confidential and classified files. Albeit brief, the crisis did two important things for RFK. It showed the national security establishment that the attorney general could insert himself into any situation whenever he deemed it necessary to act as a presidential proxy. And seeing the CIA fumbling in its efforts to handle the Dominican Republic seemed to further cement a feeling in RFK that he needed to be personally involved in agency activities in order to ensure their effectiveness. That meant keeping abreast of national security hotspots like Cuba, the Dominican Republic and a lengthening list of other places in addition to his domestic responsibilities in the administration.

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<sup>120</sup> Memorandum from Richard Goodwin to McGeorge Bundy, June 8, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, V, XII, 312.

<sup>121</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, April 13, 1964, p. 180-181, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

### **III. The Soviets and the Global Cold War**

#### **The Struggle for Berlin**

Cuba and Latin America dominated the attorney general's national security portfolio, but other pressing foreign policy matters drew RFK's attention as well. Even amid the Bay of Pigs, President Kennedy and the White House sought to maneuver for advantage in the wider Cold War on a number of fronts, and RFK thrust himself into the action with the president's approval. The attorney general began doubling as a kind of unofficial national security advisor and high-level envoy on basically any national security matter weighty enough to merit sustained attention from the president and his senior foreign policy team. Throughout the remainder of 1961 RFK took part in policy discussion and decisions on matters ranging from European summitry to military intervention in Southeast Asia. Even without an explicit mandate, the attorney general put himself at the center of national security policymaking. RFK's authority as a senior advisor on all matters simply went unquestioned by the national security team, whose members in fact actively sought RFK's participation in their work. They wanted RFK involved, because the president clearly wished it. And there was plenty of work for any senior official handling foreign policy to do. The Bay of Pigs, for all its drama and intensity, remained but one of multiple national security crises the administration faced in 1961 as the Cold War intensified, especially in Berlin.

Virtually all hope of peacefully resolving the longstanding dispute over Berlin seemed lost after the June 1961 Vienna summit between Khrushchev and President Kennedy. At the summit and afterward Khrushchev made plain his intentions to force a new security arrangement for Berlin. The Soviet premier above all wanted to halt what was becoming an exodus of Germans fleeing from east to west through the city. Khrushchev and his advisors in the Kremlin assumed the allies did not want to go to war over Berlin. After meeting JFK in Vienna, moreover, Khrushchev sensed that the new American president in particular was eager to avoid a clash.<sup>122</sup> The Kremlin was miscalculating, however. President Kennedy and the administration were ready for a confrontation in Berlin and began making plans for one as tensions rose. For RFK, the state of affairs over Berlin in the summer of 1961 represented a failure on his part as an envoy and advisor to the president. The Vienna summit was supposed to ease tensions, not heighten them. The attorney general had been working quietly for months to orchestrate a successful summit along those lines.

Shortly after the Bay of Pigs, with tensions between Washington and Moscow intensifying, RFK helped open a diplomatic backchannel with the Soviets. The attorney general began holding informal meetings about twice a month with Georgi Bolshakov, a press attaché for the Soviet embassy in Washington who served as an unofficial Washington messenger for Khrushchev. Often RFK and Bolshakov met in the attorney general's office at the Justice Department but sometimes they stepped out to a doughnut shop near the Mayflower Hotel or took walks together along

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<sup>122</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, pp. 454-458.

Constitution Avenue. Bolshakov's job at the Soviet embassy was a cover. In reality he was a colonel in the GRU, Soviet military intelligence.<sup>123</sup> The attorney general met Bolshakov through a mutual friend, *New York Times* reporter Frank Holeman, who usually helped arrange the meetings. The talks between RFK and Bolshakov covered all manner of issues concerning relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. But the idea of a summit and its would-be agenda quickly became a key topic for them. Often RFK would write nothing down about his talks with Bolshakov. He would simply brief the president verbally on the exchanges when he felt they were important. Sometimes the State Department was made aware of the communication, sometimes not. Using Bolshakov as a backchannel for diplomacy was a Kremlin idea.<sup>124</sup> RFK got the impression that the informal diplomacy, initiated by Bolshakov, served a need for Khrushchev as much as President Kennedy. Khrushchev evidently felt that the regular diplomatic communications had left him unclear about American intentions in Cuba, or so it seemed to RFK.<sup>125</sup> In any case, both sides certainly wanted to dispel murkiness about will and intentions over potential flashpoints like Berlin, and RFK showed no hesitation in serving as a discreet messenger to his brother, a role he played many times over the years.

RFK sensed that Khrushchev was misreading the situation and failing to recognize the depth of resolve in the Kennedy White House over Berlin. The attorney general told Bolshakov repeatedly that the administration would go to war

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<sup>123</sup> Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, pp. 133-134.

<sup>124</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>125</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, pp. 66-70, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

over Berlin. The Kennedys wanted that made clear to Khrushchev, and Bolshakov assured the attorney general that the message was getting through to the Kremlin.<sup>126</sup> Yet tension escalated nonetheless, with Khrushchev seemingly confident that he could move unilaterally in Berlin. RFK came to think that the Russians felt as though they could kick the president around. War seemed close, very close, as both sides hardened their positions over Berlin.<sup>127</sup> Within the administration a sense of uncertainty prevailed over the question of whether or not the United States was even ready for a war with the Soviets. RFK, McNamara and other senior officials handling national security set themselves to finding out. A crash study revealed alarmingly low levels of battle readiness across the armed forces. RFK learned that roughly half the torpedoes in U.S. submarines lacked batteries. Around a third of the soldiers in Europe had no ammunition for their guns, he was told. Something like a fifth of the anti-aircraft guns did not work at all.<sup>128</sup> The general lack of readiness for U.S. conventional forces stemmed from the Eisenhower administration's deterrence strategy, which relied on nuclear arms rather than ground troops to check the Soviet Union. That plus years of demobilization following World War II and the Korean War had left U.S. conventional forces greatly thinned. Soviet forces lacked readiness too. Like the United States, the Soviet Union had steadily reduced the size of its military through the 1950s and increasingly looked toward nuclear weaponry as a means of security. By 1961, Soviet troops tasked with defending Berlin were not

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>127</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, p. 66, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., pp. 101-103.

combat ready, and many would try to defect as the crisis intensified.<sup>129</sup> U.S. military planners nonetheless believed that Soviet forces had enough strength to overrun Berlin, an assumption RFK and the White House adopted.

The senior White House officials were unified in their determination to make a stand in Berlin, despite what they believed were low odds of holding the city in the event of an all-out Soviet attack.<sup>130</sup> The president wanted a stronger U.S. troop presence in the city. If the Soviets made a move on Berlin, President Kennedy wanted to fight there with conventional forces rather than resorting immediately to nuclear weapons. He and RFK imagined a scenario where fighting erupted in Berlin and went on for some time without either side considering the use of nuclear weapons.<sup>131</sup> During the Eisenhower years, American defense strategy in Europe revolved around the doctrine of massive retaliation, which boiled down to a standing U.S. threat of nuclear strikes against Moscow for any aggression by Soviet ground forces. But President Kennedy wanted, with RFK concurring, more room to maneuver if a conflagration erupted. If the Soviets sent a platoon into the Allied area of Berlin, why drop a nuclear bomb on Moscow instead of just sending two platoons against the Soviet forces? This is what RFK and the president wondered. The Kennedys at bottom wanted the ability to engage in an escalating ground fight for a

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<sup>129</sup> Higham and Kagan, eds., *The Military History of the Soviet Union*, p. 231.

<sup>130</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, pp. 101-103, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>131</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, pp. 94-97, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

matter of some days in the hope that a nuclear exchange could be avoided. Defenses in Berlin had to strengthen in order for that to be feasible.<sup>132</sup>

The crisis committee formed to handle the situation, the Berlin Steering Group, met two or three times a week during this period. Along with the president members of the group included the attorney general, Rusk, McNamara, Lenmitzer, Dulles, Taylor and Bundy. One of the main points RFK argued in these meetings was the need to raise taxes by as much as 1.5 percentage points in order to fund the military increases needed to defend Berlin. “I was the one who fought for that policy and was supported by all of the Cabinet with the possible exception of Dillon, plus [U.S. Information Agency Director] Edward R. Murrow,” RFK said in a dictated memo at the time.<sup>133</sup> For RFK it was not really about the money. In his mind, a tax increase represented a way to gird the country for all-out war. He wanted all Americans to feel they had a personal stake in the fight for Berlin against the Soviets. The president shunned a tax increase for a variety of reasons. But RFK’s idea of making average Americans feel they had a role to play in what seemed to be an inevitable conflict held appeal for JFK, who addressed the nation about the crisis in Berlin July 25 via television from the Oval Office.<sup>134</sup> RFK helped compose the president’s speech with Ted Sorenson, the president’s main speechwriter. The attorney general told Sorenson that the president should emphasize the legal basis underpinning the American military presence in Berlin and stress that Soviet

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<sup>132</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, April 13, 1964, p. 110, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>133</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 428.

<sup>134</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, April 13, 1964, pp. 101-103, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

domination of the city would not go unchallenged by the United States.<sup>135</sup> When RFK got his hands on a draft of the speech, he made extensive notes for revision, including a line at the top stressing the need for sacrifice on the part of Americans for the sake of the struggle in Berlin.<sup>136</sup> On air the president voiced the call for sacrifice in a grim speech. What exactly Americans were supposed to sacrifice was left vague, but the inescapable implication was that a costly war involving all was likely approaching.

On August 13, East German forces backed by the Soviets troops began stringing barbed wire barriers in border areas of Berlin, marking the beginnings of the Berlin Wall. In Washington, RFK and the president huddled with the rest of the Berlin Steering Group, contemplating how to respond. As a first move President Kennedy finalized his decision to send a battle group numbering roughly 1,800 soldiers to Berlin. The steering group also agreed to send Vice President Johnson and General Lucius Clay, hero of the Berlin Airlift, to Berlin in a show of support for West Germany. The attorney general asked if more could be done to incite worldwide protest over East Germany's actions. A breakout group consisting of RFK, Dulles, Taylor and some others set to work, though the initiative fell by the wayside as more pressing matters drew the group's attention.<sup>137</sup> Specifically, the group discussed how the administration would deal with an eruption of violence in Berlin. RFK and the others in the steering group debated how the administration

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<sup>135</sup> RFK to Sorenson, July 21, 1961, Box 242 Attorney General Papers Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>136</sup> Draft of the president's Berlin speech, July 25, 1961, Box 242, Attorney General Papers Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>137</sup> Record of Meeting of the Berlin Steering Group, Aug. 17, 1961, FRUS V. XIV, 1961-1962, 118.

should respond to various incidents should they occur. What should the U.S. response be if a surface-to-air missile brought down a U.S. plane? What would the response be if a Soviet fighter jet downed an American plane? And so on. The hopes the Kennedy brothers had for managing a phased escalation created problems with France, West Germany and the United Kingdom. The U.S. allies had for years operated on the assumption that the United States would quickly resort to nuclear weapons if the Soviets made a serious move on Berlin. The French in particular were reluctant to step forward with resources for a ground fight in Berlin, RFK recalled: “They thought it would just eventually evolve into atomic warfare. The president always thought this was rather, not only dangerous, but a weak position because it didn’t give us any flexibility.”<sup>138</sup> In short, the U.S. allies in Berlin, whose support would be crucial on the ground in the event of an outbreak of violence, did not appear ready to join the administration’s plan for incrementally responding to a provocative incident. And an incident of one kind or another seemed perhaps only moments away.

Events only looked more ominous as the following weeks unfolded. On August 30, the Kremlin resumed nuclear testing, adding to the sense of menace hanging over Berlin and darkening RFK’s own view of the situation in particular. RFK recorded:

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<sup>138</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, April 13, 1964, pp. 108-111, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

I had talked to Jack previously and he was at a loss to explain Khrushchev's decision to resume testing. It was obviously done to try to intimidate the West and the neutrals... I offered the explanation that we were as puzzled about this as Khrushchev must have been puzzled about our invasion of Cuba. As we discussed at the time, he must have thought there was something sinister and complicated behind it all or otherwise, we would not have done anything quite as stupid.<sup>139</sup>

Months earlier, before the Vienna summit, RFK nurtured hopes of a mutual ban on nuclear testing by the United States and the Soviet Union. Bolshakov suggested such a deal could be worked out during their initial backchannel talks.<sup>140</sup> Now that seemed irretrievably lost as American and Soviet forces in Berlin braced for an outbreak of fighting. In Moscow, meanwhile, Khrushchev correctly perceived that President Kennedy's reinforcement of the American garrison in Berlin along with the reappearance of Clay in the city signified a resolve he had perhaps underestimated. But Khrushchev did not back off. The Soviet premier added forces to Berlin in response to the White House's move. "We had picked up the gauntlet and were ready for the duel," Khrushchev said.<sup>141</sup> RFK put the odds of war at about one in five.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 429.

<sup>140</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, p. 74, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>141</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, pp. 458-459.

<sup>142</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview by John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, pp. 98-100, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

On October 28, American and Soviet tanks faced off during a dramatic confrontation at Checkpoint Charlie, a key crossing between East and West Berlin. A crisis that had escalated agonizingly and terrifyingly for months had finally come to a head. At the White House, the Kennedy brothers were looking for a way out before the shooting started. In a show of disgust, RFK had broken off his visits with Bolshakov when the Berlin barriers first appeared.<sup>143</sup> Now he got back in touch with a message from the president to Khrushchev. JFK asked if the tanks could be taken out within twenty-four hours in order to deescalate the situation. Bolshakov delivered the message to Khrushchev.<sup>144</sup> Soon Soviet and American tanks virtually locking horns at Checkpoint Charlie were backing away from each other. In the weeks and months that followed anxieties over Berlin gave way to grim resignation. The Berlin Wall was up. The allies were not going to knock it down. Khrushchev had won a crucial round of the Cold War in Europe, even if the White House was loathe to admit it. For RFK, though, the standoff reinforced his importance to the president as a key player in foreign policy crises. The attorney general had new confidence placed in him by the president and a proven backchannel to the Kremlin. RFK would draw on both as the foreign policy issues he faced multiplied.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-69. RFK's remembrance of this exchange is the only account available in either U.S. or Russian official archives to date.

## **Approaching Southeast Asia**

Laos troubled the Kennedy administration from its first days to its last, and in 1961 the fate of the remote country seemed all-important for a time. The previous administration had tried for years to harden Laos into a bulwark against communist advances in Southeast Asia. During the latter part of his presidency Eisenhower established a clandestine military advisory mission in Laos known as the Program Evaluation Office, and in 1959 Eisenhower added more than 100 Special Forces troops whose teams went by the code name “White Star.”<sup>145</sup> The American troops were there to aid Laotian government forces in their efforts to fend off multiple factions feuding for power in the capital, Vientiane. A series of coups allowed the rise of Nosavan Phoumi, who led the regime in Vientiane as of 1961 with U.S. backing. Phoumi’s Royal Laotian Army did not control the country, however, and the government’s hold on power appeared shaky. The most serious threat to Phoumi came from communist guerrillas known as the Pathet Lao, who drew backing from North Vietnam. Virtually everything Hanoi used in waging its war against South Vietnam moved along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which cut through Laos and Cambodia. North Vietnam’s leaders viewed control of Laotian territory incorporating the Ho Chi Minh trail as vital to their war aims and committed significant numbers of North Vietnamese forces in that effort. The Eisenhower administration in turn increasingly considered Laos a linchpin for the region, a teetering domino that could not be allowed to fall.

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<sup>145</sup> John Prados, *Safe for Democracy*, p. 346.

Once in office the Kennedy administration adopted the same mindset and moved to deepen U.S. involvement in Laos with an eye toward military intervention if necessary. In addition to providing advisers to Phoumi, Washington had the CIA create a so-called third force, a paramilitary outfit nominally aligned with the Laotian government but really serving as an agent of U.S. force in the region. In January of 1961, the CIA began delivering weapons and other supplies to the Hmong, a Laotian tribal militia force fiercely opposed to communists. At that time, the Hmong's secret army numbered around 2,500 fighters.<sup>146</sup> After Kennedy took office that number rose nearly fourfold. By mid 1961 a force of nearly 10,000 Hmong fighters was at work in the jungles of Laos against communist guerrillas traveling the Ho Chi Minh trail.<sup>147</sup> Yet still the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces made gains, dealing blows to Royal Laotian Army and taking swaths of territory. On March 23 the president spoke extensively about the situation in Laos during a press conference, essentially warning the public about the prospects of a U.S. intervention there. But events surrounding the Bay of Pigs largely eclipsed the Laos crisis, at least for a time.

RFK got involved with high-level talks about Laos shortly after the Bay of Pigs, joining regular meetings with senior national security officials to discuss the matter even though it had absolutely nothing to do with his role as attorney general. As of early August, RFK and the senior national security team at the White House were generally in agreement that an outright military intervention in Laos would come only in the event of an overt invasion by communist forces from North

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<sup>146</sup> John Prados, *Safe for Democracy*, p. 348.

<sup>147</sup> Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, p. 245.

Vietnam. If that happened, the administration planned to orchestrate a military campaign ostensibly under the banner of Southeast Asia Treaty Organization.<sup>148</sup> Member nations of the treaty organization appeared unlikely to offer meaningful help militarily, though, and the administration addressed the reality that any intervention would at bottom be a U.S. effort. So how many U.S. troops were needed to shore up the Royal Laotian Army? RFK wanted to know. Phoumi needed perhaps as many as 2,000 U.S. military advisers, according to one estimate that reached the attorney general.<sup>149</sup>

As of April 29th, the president was contemplating whether to send U.S. forces to Laos, Thailand or possibly other neighboring countries and ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff to begin preliminary planning for such moves.<sup>150</sup> RFK felt wary about another military intervention so soon after the Bay of Pigs, and he sensed deep skepticism in the president toward the idea as well. To RFK, all the talk from the military brass about sending troops to Laos sounded eerily similar to discussions on the eve of the Cuba fiasco. Indeed, RFK believed that if the Bay of Pigs had not happened, then the president would likely have sent large numbers of troops to Laos, since so many of his military advisers seemed for it. “I think we would have sent troops into Laos, and large numbers of American troops into Laos, if it hadn’t been

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<sup>148</sup> Memo from Maxwell Taylor to Attorney General et alia, Aug. 16, 1961, Box 205, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>149</sup> Memorandum for the record, “Meeting on Southeast Asia,” Aug. 11, 1961, Box 191, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John f. Kennedy Library.

<sup>150</sup> Draft record of actions for 481<sup>st</sup> NSC Meeting, May 1, 1961, Box 205, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

for Cuba, because everybody was in favor of it at the time.”<sup>151</sup> RFK’s judgment was probably correct given President Kennedy’s publically expressed concerns about Laos and the sentiments in favor of an intervention generally within the administration. But in light of the Bay of Pigs the Kennedy brothers grew more willing to challenge military advice. Together in multiple meetings with Pentagon brass the president and the attorney general probed the emerging U.S. intervention plan at its fundamentals, which involved airlifting thousands of American troops into landlocked Laos if North Vietnamese forces began moving en masse into the country. Pentagon leaders estimated that they could get 1,000 U.S. troops a day into Laos using two airports provided weather conditions were ideal. RFK understood there to be at least 3,000 communist forces in the area where U.S. troops would land, and that number could quickly double depending on how fast Hanoi acted in the face of a U.S. military buildup. What happens if the communists bomb the airports and make them unusable on, say, day three? The Kennedy brothers wanted to know and asked for answers from military planners. RFK at least heard no answers that satisfied him. The only recourse the Pentagon brass seemed to have in mind was bombing Hanoi.<sup>152</sup>

The attorney general voiced skepticism about intervention planning in a meeting August 29 with McNamara, Bundy, Air Force General Curtis LeMay and other senior officials. RFK wondered aloud to the group whether Laos was the best

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<sup>151</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview with John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, p. 52, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>152</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview with John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, p. 52, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program, John F. Kennedy Library. RFK characterized broadly multiple meetings on Laos he attended with the president and Pentagon planners without specifying dates.

place to make a stand against what many in the administration saw as an overarching communist threat to Southeast Asia. Perhaps the battle line should be drawn elsewhere in the region, he suggested. The attorney general's question went unaddressed by the rest of the group as the conversation continued, covering issues ranging from the wisdom of seeking UN involvement to the possibility of Chinese intervention. RFK spoke up again to say that sending U.S. troops only to withdraw them would make the administration look silly. He did not want to see the president commit troops unless they were going to stay for the long term. RFK then asked whether U.S. airstrikes could effectively knock the rebels back. LeMay said he thought so by destroying large amounts of supplies. The attorney general asked what the next step after that would be. Rusk said the administration should get the United Nations involved immediately after U.S. airstrikes. LeMay said the worst outcome from unilateral U.S. airstrikes would be military involvement by China in Laos. RFK asked if all blows could be dealt by air. Yes, LeMay said, they could. McNamara spoke up to say that nuclear weapons would have to be used, a suggestion no one challenged. If Laos fell, the attorney general asked, could South Vietnam and Thailand be held in a military intervention by the United States? Admiral Burke and others agreed that holding other countries in Southeast Asia would be difficult if Laos fell under communist control.<sup>153</sup> The meeting yielded no major decisions, but RFK had successfully inserted himself again into national security policymaking nonetheless.

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<sup>153</sup> Memorandum of conversation, April 29, 1961, FRUS Vol. XXIV, 1961-1963, 67.

On May 1 Rusk wrote a memorandum to the president about Laos that RFK also received. Rusk felt that the for the time being the best outcome in Laos would be to see Laos remain in a state of de facto partition. “The more we can fracture it the better,” he wrote. A centralized coalition government would likely fall under the sway of communist influence, Rusk argued.<sup>154</sup> But the prospects for a carefully balanced political solution seemed to be fading quickly as Rusk aired his ideas with the president and the attorney general. Most of the administration thinking about Laos continued to revolve around the possibility of a military intervention. And the more they thought and debated the higher the number of troops likely needed tended to get.

During another policy meeting attended by the president, Lemnitzer, addressing a question from RFK, said 13,000 U.S. troops would likely be required as a start if the administration decided to make a serious play to hold Laos. RFK, openly challenging the analysis by military brass, asked what that number of troops be expected to accomplish. Lemnitzer said that level of U.S. forces would be used to hold key territory currently under government control, allowing local forces to fight in contested areas. And what if it did not, the attorney general asked? What if the communists kept up a campaign to capture Laos? How many more U.S. troops would be needed? Lemnitzer said that would depend on the strength of the communist forces invading. RFK noted that three months prior it had been proposed that the administration take military action in southern Laos. The problem then was

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<sup>154</sup> Memorandum for the President, May 1, 1961, Box 205, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

that North Vietnamese forces were supposedly so strong in the area that they could wipe out intervention forces before they got a foothold. Why, RFK wondered, were the military men more optimistic about the prospects for intervention now? Lemnitzer said the original plan for intervention was flexible, meaning easily scaled up to include large numbers of U.S. forces. If the United States kept adding troops, the communist would likely do the same, RFK said. And would that not just lead to a direct confrontation with Hanoi, perhaps one even involving American airstrikes there? Lemnitzer acknowledged the risk of an escalation that would quickly require massive amounts of U.S. troops.<sup>155</sup> With the president's tacit support RFK had challenged the Pentagon brain trust, displaying open skepticism over their ability to formulate a successful strategy for Laos. The aim of RFK's approach was clear: protect the president from bad advice on national security policy.

Hearing all this, the president called for redoubled efforts at a diplomatic solution. He did not want to be dragged into a war in Laos, especially without backing from the British or the French, who were reluctant to throw support behind Phoumi. Moreover, U.S. public interest in the region had waned, the president noted. Laos was not the place to fight, JFK felt. He made clear that he agreed with suggestions by some that if the communists advanced in Laos, the United States would fall back and hit the communists from the sea and elsewhere outside Laos.<sup>156</sup> But at the same time he ordered an immediate increase of military advisers, who

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<sup>155</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Meeting in the Cabinet Room of the White House to Discuss Southeast Asia, Aug. 29, 1961, Digital National Security Archive, Item No. VI00501.

<sup>156</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Meeting in the Cabinet Room of the White House to Discuss Southeast Asia, Aug. 29, 1961, Digital National Security Archive, Item No. VI00501.

would now number 500 in Laos. He also wanted Thailand to contribute the same number for the same purpose. Additionally JFK ordered an immediate increase of 2,000 in the number of Meos being supported to bring the total to a level of 11,000. And he authorized stepped up surveillance of the country.<sup>157</sup> The president was looking for a way out of military involvement in Laos but appeared to see a need to keep that option open for the time being nonetheless. RFK's exact feelings on the president's chosen approach remain unclear. The attorney general made no effort to assert his own views about what U.S. policy toward Laos should be. He seemed content to support whatever options the president pursued. But RFK had reason to be pleased in the sense that the skepticism he voiced in policy deliberations seemed to help deflate support for the aggressive military move advocated by Pentagon brass. RFK had hoped to keep the president from making a rash move in Laos, and JFK had indeed adopted a sense of caution toward the situation.

A number of factors worked to ease the sense of crisis surrounding Laos in the White House as the summer of 1961 drew to a close. Seasonal rains slowed fighting on the ground, opening the way for a ceasefire. Diplomatic efforts aimed at forming a neutralist government in Vientiane, President Kennedy's preferred outcome, seemed to be making some progress. Khrushchev appeared to remain sincerely committed to pledges he made in Vienna to work towards a neutral Laos, despite increased tensions between Washington and Moscow on other disputes. The larger issue of preparing for direct war with the Soviet Union drew the attention of the

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<sup>157</sup> National Security Action Memorandum No. 80, Aug. 29, 1961, Box 205, Attorney General Papers Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

White House and the American public away from Southeast Asia, too. But RFK remained watchful, taking on Laos as yet another issue in his foreign policy portfolio. CIA reports made available to the attorney general showed North Vietnamese combat units active in Laos as early as March 1961, and their numbers seemed to be only increasing. Initially scattered reports suggested dozens or perhaps hundreds of North Vietnamese fighters, but by the summer of 1962 the CIA would put the number at more than 5,000.<sup>158</sup> More North Vietnamese fighters appearing in Laos meant more cause for reconsidering U.S. military intervention there, and RFK would keep himself at the center of those policy deliberations as they arose. For RFK the crisis in Laos never really passed. It simply simmered and occasionally threatened to boil over, pulling him in again and again.

### **Focusing on Vietnam**

Laos and Vietnam were, of course, interwoven conflicts. The main factor destabilizing Laos was infiltration by fighters from North Vietnam, and so RFK naturally took part in the administration's increasing discussions about Vietnam as a crisis built there throughout 1961. A White House task force dedicated itself to formulating a plan to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam, and RFK involved himself in the various policy proposals that began taking shape. Reports and memoranda from the highest rungs of the national security establishment began flowing his way. The outlook in Vietnam as of 1961 was much bleaker than Laos,

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<sup>158</sup> CIA Director John McCone, "Viet Minh Troops in Laos," undated, Box 205, Attorney General Papers Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

RFK learned. Communists had steadily pressed a guerrilla campaign against South Vietnam since 1959. U.S. intelligence estimates put the number of communist fighters in South Vietnam at 12,000 as of April 1961, up from 4,400 in early 1960. Nearly 60 percent of the country fell under some form of communist control ranging from harassment and night raids to administrative jurisdiction in so-called communist secure areas.<sup>159</sup> Every month brought more 600 bloody incidents of one kind or another, and casualties on both sides passed 4,500 in the first three months of 1961.<sup>160</sup> The country appeared to be teetering on the brink of an open civil war, a conflict the communists looked likely to win.

The Pentagon was calling for quick action on a counterinsurgency campaign meant to deal some blows against the Viet Cong and instill some staying power in South Vietnam's ruling regime, led by Ngo Dinh Diem. A key aspect of that plan fell under RFK's emerging responsibility as unofficial overseer of covert operations, the president's son of bitch on such issues. The Pentagon and the CIA were proposing a significant escalation of covert operations against North Vietnamese forces. And by at least May of 1961 the attorney general became privy to such plans.<sup>161</sup> RFK's views on the specific counterinsurgency initiatives he saw early on remain unclear, but he wholeheartedly embraced the idea that Vietnam was a vital struggle for the United States in the Cold War. Allowing a communist takeover of Vietnam, RFK

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<sup>159</sup> A Program of Action to Prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam, April 26, 1961, Box 205, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>160</sup> Memo from JCS to National Security Council, May 10, 1961, Box 205, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>161</sup> Memorandum for the National Security Council, May 10, 1961, Box 205, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

felt, would be a disaster for the United States in Southeast Asia and other regions of the world where America hoped to prevail against global communism. In an interview RFK said:

It would just have profound effects on our position throughout the world and our position in a rather vital part of the world. It would affect what happened in India, of course, which in turn has an effect on the Middle East. It would have, everybody felt, a very adverse effect. It would have an effect on Indonesia, with a hundred million population. All these countries would be affected by the fall of Vietnam to the Communists, particularly as we had made such a fuss in the United States both under President Eisenhower and President Kennedy about the preservation of the integrity of Vietnam.<sup>162</sup>

The administration's early covert operations program in Vietnam called for small teams of U.S. paramilitaries drawn from the ranks of CIA operatives and Army Special Forces. They would step up sabotage actions against communist forces in Laos and North Vietnam, with support from friendly forces. The approach amounted to escalation, especially considering that the Pentagon advocated increased covert operations in Laos regardless of the ceasefire.

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<sup>162</sup> Robert Kennedy, *Robert Kennedy in His Own Words*, pp. 394-395.

Bundy, Taylor and other key players on Vietnam policy kept RFK abreast of discussions on the issue as a matter of course in the latter half 1961. White House advisers evidently understood that RFK's thoughts would likely form part of the president's decisions at key moments on major issue like Vietnam, Berlin, Cuba and Soviet relations. On Cuba, the president was explicit regarding RFK's leading role. On other matters such as Vietnam and Laos, RFK's role went less well defined. But since the Bay of Pigs the president most certainly made clear that RFK would henceforth be a part of national security decisions, and the attorney general appeared to have no hesitation in fulfilling that task. Bundy and Taylor in particular ensured RFK was informed about the action plan for Vietnam. Documents written for the president on Vietnam by his senior advisers also went to RFK regularly at the Justice Department. RFK did not become heavily involved with policy discussions on Vietnam at White House meetings in that first year the way he did for Berlin, Laos and Cuba. But he absorbed the details of the policy program the national security team was crafting for Vietnam nonetheless and actively tracked the progress of its various elements.<sup>163</sup>

In the earliest months of the administration, before the Bay of Pigs, the president had already taken some action on Vietnam. Within days of his inauguration President Kennedy sat in the Oval Office with Dulles and Rusk listening to a briefing by Edward Lansdale about the increasingly worrisome situation. Communist forces in the north were making alarming gains even then. Lansdale, a former military

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<sup>163</sup> RFK in handwritten notes on Vietnam, undated, Box 205, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

officer who worked on counterinsurgency for the CIA, warned that Diem was struggling to hold out against communist aggression. Lansdale advised swift action to save the Diem regime from downfall. President Kennedy grew convinced of the need for action in Vietnam but remained wary of direct military intervention. So he called for covert operations, which were undertaken before in Vietnam unsuccessfully. During the Eisenhower administration the CIA had stood up several small commando squads to serve as counterinsurgency teams meant to operate in North Vietnam. Yet they had never mounted any missions across the frontline, because Diem had for years proven squeamish about fielding forces in communist territory.<sup>164</sup> Dulles explained the past CIA efforts at covert operations to President Kennedy, who said repeatedly in the Oval Office meeting in January of 1961 that covert operations should be active in northern areas nonetheless.<sup>165</sup> The response from the Pentagon and the CIA to the president's order for covert action during his first days in office was taking shape in the form of the policy proposals circulating to RFK by mid 1961. The president had more or less set a course for American intervention before RFK got involved. The question going forward would be how far the administration was willing to go in its efforts to save Diem.

Part of President Kennedy's impulse for U.S. action in Vietnam stemmed from what he and others in the White House perceived to be a new and extremely dangerous threat arising in the Cold War. In January of 1961, shortly before president-elect Kennedy took the oath of office, Khrushchev publically committed the

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<sup>164</sup> Richard Shultz, *the Secret War against Hanoi*, p. 14.

<sup>165</sup> Oval Office meeting on Vietnam, Jan. 28, 1961. DSNA Item No. V100784.

Soviet Union to supporting “wars of liberation or popular uprisings” in a speech widely noted in Washington. Khrushchev’s vow deeply worried JFK, who pored over a text of the remarks during his first weeks in the White House. Kennedy took the speech with him to Cabinet meetings, to dinners with friends and to quiet moments alone. Sometimes he would even quote from the speech aloud and ask his advisers to comment.<sup>166</sup> JFK believed Khrushchev meant what he said and would make good on his promise to foment communist uprising in the developing world. Moreover, JFK had become a serious student of revolutionary warfare and understood its power and appeal in the Third World. President Kennedy had read writings about communist revolution by twentieth century practitioners such as Ernesto Che Guevara and Mao Zedong, and the president pressed his advisers from the start to contemplate what he believed was a serious menace.<sup>167</sup> The specter of legions of communist guerrillas backed by Moscow on the march across Africa, Asia and Latin America drove JFK to issue an order on February 1, 1961, calling for the Department of Defense to examine ways of developing counterinsurgency forces, consulting with other government agencies as needed.<sup>168</sup>

Counterinsurgency had a specific meaning to the Kennedy administration defined by two closely studied conflicts in Asia during the 1950s. In the Philippines, the Hukbalahap Insurrection pitted communist guerrillas against the government in Manila. The crisis erupted under President Truman, who offered limited yet

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<sup>166</sup> Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, p. 350.

<sup>167</sup> Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, p. 415.

<sup>168</sup> National Security Action Memorandum No. 2, Feb. 3, 1961, DSNA No. PD00631.

ultimately decisive military and intelligence support to the government. By 1955, the Philippine government had put down the communist rebellion, and Lansdale had earned a reputation as a cunning CIA officer who led the U.S. effort. The fundamental lesson of the so-called Huk rebellion, according to Lansdale and others, was that effective counterinsurgency involved lots of politics aimed at capturing hearts and minds and relatively little, yet decisively employed, military force. This was a notion of counterinsurgency that sharply contrasted with the U.S. effort against Philippine guerrillas at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when brute force against the civilian population was seen by U.S. commanders as the best way to sap the strength of insurgents.

Lansdale's conception of counterinsurgency meshed perfectly with strategy developed by Robert Thompson, a British military thinker whose ideas deeply influenced the Kennedy administration. Thompson served in key senior roles with the British military in Malaya in the mid 1950s, when U.K. forces battled a communist insurrection there. By 1960, the Malayan communists were in defeat, and Thompson arose as a strategist deserving much of the credit. Thompson then went on to advocate novel counterinsurgency strategies in Saigon, where he became head of the British Advisory Mission in 1961 and drew notice from Roger Hilsman, the director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research and increasingly a correspondent with RFK on Vietnam. Thompson's approach to isolating and eliminating communist guerrillas became known as the inkblot strategy, a.k.a. "clear, hold and build." Areas that security forces effectively control can be

seen as inkblots on a map. To pacify a country gripped by armed rebellion, you spread the inkblots outward -- block by block, town by town. Any area that falls under the spreading inkblot must be cleared of insurgents and subsequently policed and provided for so that guerrillas cannot find sympathy or safe harbor there in the future. This approach when done successfully, in theory, accomplished two things: It forced insurgents to gather in concentrations elsewhere in the country where they can be confronted, and it denied them areas of retreat.

This core concept of separating guerrillas from the civilian population formed the basis of Thompson's so-called strategic hamlet program, which Hilsman and other Kennedy administration thinkers on counterinsurgency liked. Hilsman felt that Thompson's counterinsurgency strategies "jibed completely with the results of the studies we had been conducting in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research."<sup>169</sup> Here was a forward-leaning plan to confront communist guerrillas in the Third World that brought together lessons learned about protecting civilian populations and defined a clear offensive role for U.S. forces to play through paramilitary and covert operations. This kind of doctrinal thinking about counterinsurgency percolated among the New Frontier thinkers throughout 1961, with Hilsman and presidential advisor Walt Rostow prominent advocates of an idea already embraced by JFK. Counterinsurgency as preached by strategists like Rostow went beyond the tactical steps taken by security forces to eliminate insurgents, however. Successful counterinsurgency also required what would in later times be known as nation

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<sup>169</sup> Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, p. 433.

building, i.e. economic and political development.<sup>170</sup> The basic idea of a holistic approach was to seed economic uplift and political liberalization in troubled countries while strengthening their security forces at the same time. That way the United States would build a coalition of strong, loyal nations in the Third World resistant to communism.

RFK became peripherally involved in counterinsurgency policymaking in 1961, getting looped into a series of memos and discussions originating in the National Security Council on the topic. The president viewed Latin America as the priority region for counterinsurgency operations.<sup>171</sup> Cuba was at the center of the administration's concerns about security threats to Latin America, and the president had made it clear that RFK had a lead role to play there. It followed, then, that RFK would have a part to play in counterinsurgency strategy in the region. RFK had an additional stake in counterinsurgency policy as a law enforcement official. The president wanted stronger security forces overall in Latin America, meaning not just military but police also. President Kennedy moved to launch a program whereby police officers from Latin America would come to the United States for training by the FBI, which under Hoover of course prided itself on its supposed ability to crush alleged communist subversion within the United States.<sup>172</sup> President Kennedy viewed his attorney general as the policymaker who could help oversee the process of

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<sup>170</sup> Author Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and his Times*, p. 460.

<sup>171</sup> National Security Action Memorandum No. 114, Nov. 22, 1961, Box 194, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>172</sup> National Security Action Memorandum No. 88, Sept. 5, 1961, Box 194, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

instilling the FBI's anticommunism prowess in the domestic security forces of nations abroad.

In Vietnam, President Kennedy and his advisers saw the kind of communist insurrection Khrushchev threatened to spread worldwide materializing in real time. The country became at once a security crisis and a test case for the counterinsurgency doctrine of the New Frontier. By May of 1961 discussions about strategy and doctrine were hardening into policy proposals put to the president and contemplated by RFK. The program ultimately endorsed by the White House task force on Vietnam was basically a counterinsurgency plan of the kind Thompson and Lansdale saw as key to their successes in Malaya and the Philippines. President Kennedy had in fact designated Lansdale as the operations officer for his Vietnam task force, which suggested a wide array of diplomatic, economic and propaganda measures to improve the situation. Proposed projects ranged from tax reform to agricultural aid, but the core of the intervention strategy was a buildup of conventional U.S. military forces to support the South Vietnamese government and an increased tempo of covert operations involving joint efforts by the Army and the CIA. Infiltration teams of Vietnamese irregulars posing as civilians were to be sent from Vietnam into Laos, where they could attack communist bases and lines of communication. These U.S.-trained teams were allowed to be as large as 150 men if needed for assaults. And the plan called for more infiltration of North Vietnam by South Vietnamese operatives who could "form networks of resistance, covert bases and teams for sabotage and

light harassment.”<sup>173</sup> President Kennedy approved the proposed covert operations in full without hesitation.<sup>174</sup> RFK watched and listened avidly as the policy programs for Vietnam and counterinsurgency moved from debate to action. Like many in the administration, RFK was an early enthusiast for counterinsurgency doctrine.<sup>175</sup> He saw counterinsurgency as a military and political strategy that could help the United States win the Cold War in the developing world and continued to believe in it even after seeing its failures and shortcomings in Vietnam. In his 1968 book *To Seek a Newer World*, RFK wrote:

Insurgency aims not at the conquest of territory but at the allegiance of men. In the Latin American countryside as in other threatened parts of the world, that allegiance can be won only by positive programs: by land reform, by schools, by honest administration, by roads and clinics and labor unions and even-handed justice, and a share for all men in the decisions that shape their lives. Counterinsurgency might best be described as social reform under pressure. Any effort that disregards the base of social reform, and becomes preoccupied with gadgets and techniques and force, is doomed to failure and should not be supported by the United States.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> A Program of Action to Prevent Communist Takeover of South Vietnam, May 1, 1961, pp. 16-18. DSNA V100801.

<sup>174</sup> National Security Action Memorandum No. 52, May 11, 1961, DSNA No. PD00700.

<sup>175</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 461.

<sup>176</sup> Robert Kennedy, *To Seek a Newer World*, pp. 112-113.

#### **IV. The Rise of Operation Mongoose**

##### **A Lead Role at the CIA**

Two significant changes at the CIA empowered RFK in his newfound role as a fighter in the Cold War during the fall of 1961. Longtime director Allen Dulles left the agency amid the lingering fallout from the Bay of Pigs. The departure of Dulles marked the end of an era for the agency, which had gained a high level of prestige in the national security establishment during his storied tenure. The CIA under Dulles developed a reputation as an agency with solutions to foreign policy problems that baffled the Pentagon and the State Department. But in the fall of 1961 Dulles was effectively fired, and the CIA became to the Kennedy White House more or less just another troubled government agency needing oversight and direction if it were to be an asset in a global struggle against communism. This loss of stature and leadership would help RFK assert himself at the CIA, especially in his new role as overseer of efforts to depose Castro. President's Kennedy's explicit intent to have RFK play an increasing role on Cuba found concrete expression when RFK assumed the leadership of Operation Mongoose. The attorney general by virtually all accounts grew to become his most determined and ruthless self in heading up the secret war against Castro in the yearlong period spanning the fall of 1961 and the Cuban missile crisis. RFK embodied the president's will to destroy Castro, an urge the attorney general ardently shared.

RFK personally interviewed the White House pick for a new head of the CIA, industrialist turned public servant John McCone. RFK felt that the CIA most needed an effective administrator, not a policymaker. Neither of the Kennedys knew McCone personally but felt comfortable with his reputation and credentials, even though McCone's profile stood in sharp contrast with most of the senior officials of the administration.<sup>177</sup> A Republican and Nixon supporter in 1960, McCone was no New Frontiersman. He came from a much different world than the one shared by many of the liberal northeasterners in the administration. During the 1930s and 1940s, McCone grew wealthy as a California businessman. An engineer by training, he worked at the top levels of steel, construction and shipping companies before coming to public service. McCone's first major government job was as undersecretary of the Air Force for two years starting in 1950, when his chief task was to oversee production of aircraft for use in the Korean War. Later McCone went on to further his reputation as an effective administrator by serving as chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission during the last three years of the Eisenhower administration. Initially McCone feared that his partisanship would hinder his ability to serve in a Democratic administration when the idea of joining first arose.<sup>178</sup> The Kennedys did not feel that way, however. They brushed such concerns aside and welcomed McCone, who replaced Dulles at the CIA in September of 1961. During his confirmation hearings McCone told lawmakers that he did not consider himself a

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<sup>177</sup> Robert Kennedy, in recorded interview with John Bartlow Martin, March 1, 1964, pp. 57-61, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>178</sup> *New York Times*, Sept. 28, 1961.

policymaker, a role the previous director certainly adopted. McCone instead saw himself as basically the manager of the CIA. As far as McCone was concerned, the White House decided what operations the CIA would undertake. The director just oversaw them. Only the president could decide, for example, whether the leader of a foreign country could be deposed by the CIA, McCone said.<sup>179</sup>

The attorney general and McCone quickly forged a bond. Shared feelings on Cuba formed a big part of their connection. McCone had watched events in Cuba during the latter part of the Eisenhower administration carefully and felt that for a time a diplomatic solution could be had with Castro, some arrangement whereby relations between Washington and Havana could normalize enough to keep Cuba out of the Soviet sphere. But after the Bay of Pigs McCone saw no chance of rapprochement, and there was no discussion of it in the Kennedy White House. Moreover, McCone shared RFK's perspective on the dangers Castro posed. Both felt the Cuban leader was likely to allow Soviet forces on the island and sow revolutionary politics throughout Latin America. And like RFK, McCone believed Castro would allow Soviet missiles in Cuba, a scenario that many in the intelligence community doubted would arise. Such a move was thought by many analysts to be too bold, even for Castro. RFK made certain that McCone understood his zeal for Castro's downfall, but McCone saw no immediate prospects for that. The new director believed the intelligence estimates showing Castro held widespread support

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<sup>179</sup> McCone testimony before the Senate Armed Forces Committee, Jan. 18, 1962, CIA/CREST.

and that a general uprising was unlikely.<sup>180</sup> If the administration wanted to see Castro go, then they would have to do more, much more, than simply encourage Cubans to revolt and hope for the best.

By early November 1961 the president mulled launching a new covert program against Castro, but he was unsure what such an operation should entail or who should lead it. By then White House advisor and speechwriter Richard Goodwin, a member of the Kennedy inner circle since 1959, had risen to become deputy assistant secretary of State for inter-American affairs, a position he used to expand his considerable sway over administration policy on Cuba and Latin America generally. Goodwin wholly endorsed the idea of a renewed secret campaign against Castro, and he urged the president to appoint the attorney general as chief of a revamped anti-Castro operation. RFK's energy and effectiveness were self-evident. Furthermore, the Cuba hands at the CIA remained stuck in the old thinking that led to the Bay of Pigs, Goodwin suggested. At the same time no one at the State Department appeared up to the job. The attorney general seemed to be ideal, Goodwin argued, provided his role could remain secret. Goodwin said RFK should have a deputy connected to the upper levels of the CIA, someone to ensure the attorney general's orders were carried out while his hand remained hidden.<sup>181</sup> Goodwin evidently took for granted that such a role for the attorney general would be appropriate and legally allowable, as did the

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<sup>180</sup> John McCone, recorded interview with WGBH, 1986, WGBH Media Library and Archives, Boston. Available online as part of the Open Vault collection: <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/wpna-b3557c-interview-with-john-mccone-1986-2>.

<sup>181</sup> Memo from Goodwin to JFK, Nov. 1, 1961, FRUS V. X, 1961-1962, 269.

president. The impulse to do something about Cuba seemed to override all other considerations.

An intelligence estimate on Cuba prepared at the president's request offered virtually no cause for optimism that a new covert campaign against Cuba would succeed, despite all the eagerness within the White House. Castro's grip on the country was tighter than ever. He appeared to have significant popular support. What remained of an internal opposition were more inclined to flee than rise rebel. U.S. efforts to stir internal dissent and subversion seemed doomed to fail. Not even Castro's untimely death would likely alter the situation. The regime could endure without him. In fact, Castroism might even thrive all the more with Castro enshrined as a martyr.<sup>182</sup> In short, another stab at Castro was virtually pointless. With that intelligence estimate in hand, the president and the attorney general huddled with McNamara, Goodwin, Bundy, Bissell, Lansdale and several other officials from the CIA and the State Department in early November of 1961 for lengthy discussions of new plans for Castro nevertheless. And soon the president authorized a new program, code named Operation Mongoose. RFK assumed overall control, and Lansdale became his deputy, serving as chief of operations. So began a pattern of behavior that, when contemplated decades later, seems to make little sense. After the Bay of Pigs U.S. intelligence estimates consistently stated that covert action aimed at toppling Castro held low odds of success, but the president and the attorney general consistently demanded action in any case. It is important to remember, however, that

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<sup>182</sup> Memorandum from the Chairman of the Board of National Estimates to the Director of Central Intelligence Dulles, Nov. 3, 1961, FRUS, V. X, 1961-1962, 271.

while intelligence estimates about the likelihood of Castro's downfall changed, the underlying reason for the U.S. policy of seeking his overthrow had not. The Eisenhower administration had decided that Castro represented too great a threat to the hemisphere to be allowed to remain in power. The Kennedy administration adopted that policy and saw no reason to abandon it after the Bay of Pigs. Indeed, as RFK pointed out, the need to act against Castro only grew more urgent in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs. Chances of success seemed low for U.S. efforts in Cuba, but none of the other Cold War struggles the administration contemplated seemed especially promising. Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, for example, held no easy solutions either, and yet the Kennedy administration waded into those conflicts too. And none of those countries posed a threat as near to the United States as Cuba did. The Kennedy administration's pursuit of Castro in 1961 and much of 1962 was not in fact illogical. The policy remained consistent with national security stratagems willingly adopted by the Kennedy administration from the Eisenhower administration, and it carried a reasonable sense of urgency given that the grave fears RFK expressed over the prospect Soviet missiles in Cuba turned out to be well founded.

Operation Mongoose officially fell under the purview of the Special Group, a panel within the National Security Council tasked with overseeing covert operations. Established during the Eisenhower administration, the Special Group consisted of top officials from the State Department and the Pentagon tasked with oversight of covert operations conceived and launched by the CIA. The Cuba project, as Operation

Mongoose was also known, became a kind of subcommittee of the Special Group, called the Special Group (Augmented). Augmented signified the involvement of the attorney general, whose regular job as a cabinet member of course normally had nothing to do with covert operations. Political imperatives trumped the organizational arrangements, however. From the start Mongoose was RFK's operation, even if on paper Taylor, McCone and Bundy were supposed to be the real overseers. McCone for one understood that those working on the Cuba project, including him, answered directly to the attorney general.<sup>183</sup> RFK drove that message home by gathering the main players on Operation Mongoose in his office at the Justice Department for an early strategy session in January of 1962. Richard Helms, who had then replaced Bissell as CIA deputy director for plans, attended the meeting with a number of others and listened as the attorney general forcefully made sure everyone understood that getting rid of Castro was the administration's top foreign policy objective.<sup>184</sup> "We are in a combat situation," RFK said during an early Mongoose meeting.<sup>185</sup> As far as Helms was concerned RFK spoke directly on behalf of the president.<sup>186</sup> The two Kennedys were one and the same when it came to Cuba. Few who worked with either the president or the attorney general in this period failed to perceive that reality.

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<sup>183</sup> John McCone, recorded interview with WGBH, 1986, WGBH Media Library and Archives, Boston. Available online as part of the Open Vault collection: <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/wpna-b3557c-interview-with-john-mccone-1986-2>.

<sup>184</sup> Richard Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, pp. 202-203.

<sup>185</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, p. 148.

<sup>186</sup> Richard Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, pp. 205-206.

Lansdale for his part delighted in the idea of serving as a key lieutenant to the Kennedy brothers in formulating a new covert operation. Lansdale was of course already advising the president on Vietnam, but Cuba now took priority. In both roles Lansdale presented himself to the Kennedys as a plucky officer bucking the system, a man of action fighting the good fight against both communism and an ossified Washington bureaucracy. He suggested to RFK that a “heavy whip” might instill some fighting spirit in bureaucrats seemingly reluctant toward launching another campaign against Cuba.<sup>187</sup> He pooh-poohed intelligence estimates arguing that an uprising had little chance of success. Determined action, Lansdale argued, would bring results.<sup>188</sup> The attorney general knew Lansdale by reputation when the Mongoose team first came together, calling him the “Ugly American” in handwritten notes from an early meeting they had. Owing to his adventures in Southeast Asia during the 1950s, Lansdale reportedly became the basis for the title character of the bestselling 1958 novel *The Ugly American* by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer.

RFK seemed unimpressed by Lansdale’s notoriety. The lanky officer now worked for him, and RFK ordered Lansdale to survey the situation, outlining the problem and what assets the administration held. The move represented standard government task force operating procedure -- formation of a committee, issuance of a report and drafting of policy proposals, etc. RFK might as well have dispensed with the pro forma bureaucratic machinations, however. He already knew what he wanted.

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<sup>187</sup> Lansdale to RFK in handwritten note, Dec. 7, 1961, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>188</sup> Memorandum from Lansdale to the Attorney General, Nov. 30, 1961, FRUS V. X, 1961-1962, 277.

At the time he wrote: “My idea is to stir things up on island with espionage, sabotage, general disorder, run & operated by Cubans themselves with every group but the Batistaites [sic] & Communists. Do not know if we will be successful in overthrowing Castro but we have nothing to lose in my estimate.”<sup>189</sup>

### **Pushing the Bureaucracy of Covert Operations**

Lansdale considered himself the Cuba project’s lead strategist in addition to operations chief, and he began developing elaborate policy proposals that went to RFK and the others on the Mongoose team. How much substantive interaction RFK and Lansdale shared in shaping a new covert operation strategy is unclear. Lansdale wrote many, many memos to RFK, as the attorney general’s papers reflect. But Lansdale’s papers hold no memos written from RFK. In fact, Lansdale’s papers, housed at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, have no documentation of Operation Mongoose at all. The only trace of Operation Mongoose in the Lansdale papers is a handful of press clippings Lansdale collected years later when the operation came to light through congressional investigations. The omission of any documents about Operation Mongoose in Lansdale’s papers raises questions. What did RFK write and say to Lansdale when they worked together on Cuba? Available evidence sheds little light. At present, we have only one side of a conversation captured in the memoranda Lansdale wrote to RFK.

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<sup>189</sup> RFK handwritten notes, Nov. 7, 1961, FRUS, V. X, 1961-1962, 270.

Lansdale's voluminous memos to RFK and other members of the Mongoose team smacked of Madison Avenue hype, which Lansdale understood well from his former days as an advertising executive. His plans for Cuba were generally long on vague promises of success against Castro. Despite his outward optimism, Lansdale's approach adopted the assumption that a Cuban uprising remained highly unlikely. Thus Lansdale's strategy tended to emphasize the cumulative effects of a long-term campaign aimed at undermining, rather than overthrowing, Castro. Sabotage operations in Lansdale's view were chiefly propaganda exercises, dramatic acts intended to alter popular perceptions about Castro's strength. Over time, the thinking went, Castro's power would erode if Cubans began to see him as weak and ineffectual.<sup>190</sup> At their best Lansdale's thoughts as expressed in lengthy memos flowing to RFK offered a seemingly highly sophisticated form of clandestine warfare, a nuanced strategy combining propaganda and political violence effectively. At their worst they sounded like salesmanship drawing on pseudo science to push dubious policy proposals.

Lansdale initially conceived several phases for Operation Mongoose. Each phase had specific objectives to be accomplished on a set timeline. Phase one ran roughly from the spring of 1962 to about July of that year. It had the following goals: increase intelligence from Cuba, coordinate political, economic and covert activities aimed at Cuba, remain consistent with overt U.S. policy and continue military

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<sup>190</sup> Memo for the Special Group Augmented by Lansdale, Aug. 14, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified Files, John F. Kennedy Library. Lansdale's emphasis on psychology and propaganda are on display here and in the many other similar such policy memos he wrote that went to RFK. Lansdale's many memos from this period were highly repetitive.

planning to ensure capability for a possible U.S. intervention.<sup>191</sup> From the beginning, the Mongoose team, including RFK, worked on the assumption that U.S. military intervention would ultimately be needed to overthrow Castro and that one of the project's goals was to produce a justification for direct U.S. military action.<sup>192</sup> The first order of business, however, was to renew U.S. intelligence on Cuba, where the CIA had little presence owing to the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs. Castro's security forces had effectively broken what network the CIA had. The CIA was struggling to maintain contact with the handful of agents it had inside the country, McCone told RFK. On paper the CIA had 27 or 28 agents in Cuba. But only about a dozen were in communication, and contacts were infrequent. As Operation Mongoose geared, up a team of seven agents infiltrated Cuba but were captured, with two giving televised confessions.<sup>193</sup>

A paucity of intelligence assets in Cuba was one of the project's thorniest problems during its early days but hardly the only one. As Lansdale found, a lack of consensus about the underlying policy made crafting strategy difficult. The senior officials involved in the Cuba project disagreed on both the goals and the approach. For example, the central assumption of eventual U.S. military intervention directly in Cuba regularly came into question as the Mongoose team pondered various moves against Castro. Lansdale believed that an internal revolt strong enough to topple

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<sup>191</sup> Review of Operation Mongoose, July 25, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>192</sup> Minutes of the Special Group on Cuba, Feb. 26, 1962, JFK Assassination Records, JCS Files, FOIA Series, NARA Record Number 202-10001-10197.

<sup>193</sup> Memorandum for the file, McCone notes on conversation with RFK, Dec. 27, 1961, FRUS V. X, 1961-1962, 285.

Castro could take shape in Cuba, but open U.S. support of Cuban rebels was key to success in Lansdale's mind. He argued that sufficient means and manpower in fact already existed within Cuba and among the exile community in the United States to overthrow Castro. The Cubans really only lacked will and organization, which the administration could provide if it wanted.<sup>194</sup> But the administration needed to act quickly, Lansdale argued, or risk losing vital momentum. The will of the Cuban people to resist the Castro regime was fading, Lansdale believed.<sup>195</sup> In Lansdale's view, people inside Cuba needed to see a rebellion come to life in order to gather enough courage to take to the streets themselves en masse and overthrow Castro.<sup>196</sup> The base of that rebellion would naturally be within the Cuban exile community in the United States. Certainly Cuban exiles in America offered a vital asset for the Cuba project. Their ranks were swelling all the time. Nearly 7,000 Cubans fled the island for the United States in February of 1962 alone, joining a community of some 100,000 Cuban emigrants who began streaming to America after the revolution in 1959.<sup>197</sup> But open U.S. support for rebel activities by the exile community posed legal and political pitfalls the White House was unwilling to risk.

Meanwhile, the administration's urge to keep the new Cuba project secret hindered efforts to get operations going. In the end everyone involved understood

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<sup>194</sup> Review of Operation Mongoose, July 25, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>195</sup> Lansdale, program review of the Cuba Project, March 2, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>196</sup> Lansdale, program review of the Cuba Project, March 2, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>197</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, "The Situation and Prospects in Cuba," March 21, 1962, pp. 1-5, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

that Cubans from the exile community would be the main operatives in the campaign against Castro. But they needed training and support, which was difficult to provide within the United States without attracting attention. A U.S. airbase in Florida was available for CIA use, but training Cubans there would clearly reveal U.S. backing. Lansdale did not know whether that was okay or not and had to seek guidance. Throwing off the veil covering secret U.S. involvement with Cuban rebels was a policy decision only the White House could make, however thin that veil might have been. The same issue troubled efforts to arm exile groups. Were they to get U.S. weapons even if they were not directly under U.S. supervision? Rebels undertaking independent action with American arms could raise political dilemmas. Lansdale wanted clear guidance on that question as well, likely sensing that he would shoulder the blame for any rebel debacles in the absence of explicit orders from higher ups. Also, the unfolding plan called for a large measure of direct U.S. military support. The Pentagon was supposed to supply cargo planes, amphibious assault crafts and submarines to get exiles trained by the CIA in and out of Cuba. But what were the rules of engagement for the U.S. servicemen working to support the Cuban rebels? Lansdale was unsure and wanted to know.<sup>198</sup> Answers from the White House were not forthcoming.

As of spring of 1962, RFK and the other members of the Mongoose leadership team seemed to have little clarity on exactly what the operation was supposed to do. Lansdale seemed to see Operation Mongoose as a grand strategy, a long-term

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<sup>198</sup> Memorandum from Lansdale to the Special Group Augmented, March 12, 1962, FRUS V. X, 1961-1962, 311.

campaign involving economic warfare, diplomatic pressure, covert action and sophisticated propaganda to undermine Castro to the point where his regime teetered. At the same time Lansdale offered contradictory analysis arguing that nothing short of a direct U.S. military intervention timed with a Cuban uprising could bring down the Castro regime. For his part, RFK seemed to see Mongoose as a way to deal quick blows against Castro and keep up pressure on him, even if the endgame remained uncertain. McCone, meanwhile, appeared to view Mongoose as a way to rebuild intelligence capabilities within Cuba, at least initially. Taylor seemed to think Mongoose was a prelude to a direct military intervention, even though the president was openly skeptical that overt military action would ever become an option politically. It was even unclear whether or not Lansdale would remain involved. His position as operations chief was tenuous, up for review at regular intervals.<sup>199</sup>

Of all the uncertainties the question of whether the White House would ever okay an outright invasion remained the most problematic. The president had clearly signaled his intention to refrain from outright war against Cuba. The political calculation vis-à-vis the wider Cold War remained the same as it was during the Bay of Pigs. Moreover, an invasion of Cuba would be extremely costly even if the rest of the Cold War conflict regions remained stable. The Joint Chiefs of Staff produced an estimate of what such an operation would involve. About 261,000 U.S. military personnel would be needed in order to seize control of Cuba within ten to fifteen days. In other words the invasion would have to be about twice the size of D-Day.

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<sup>199</sup> Guidelines for Operation Mongoose, March 14, 1962, FRUS V. X, 1961-1962, 314.

Once on the island U.S. occupation forces would likely find themselves battling a determined insurgency of unknowable duration.<sup>200</sup> But if the United States was never going to invade, what was the point of fomenting a Cuban rebellion that would only be crushed?

Frustration and impatience welled among RFK, McCone, Lansdale and others at work on the project as the uncertainty persisted. Lansdale especially had reason to be angry since much of the intense pressure for the project to produce quick results fell on him. Lansdale began to feel that Operation Mongoose in its current form was essentially futile so long as the administration remained unwilling to engage in an open confrontation with Castro. In Lansdale's view, the White House needed to expand support of Cuban rebels to the point where Washington's hand certainly would be revealed and seriously contemplate direct military invasion. Such firm action by the United States, Lansdale argued, would solve most of America's problems in Latin America generally. Inaction only served to strengthen America's enemies in the region and beyond. Lansdale seemed driven to convince the Kennedys to take a much more forceful approach to Cuba, eschewing the caution the president himself had preferred.<sup>201</sup>

Confusion over the ultimate objectives for Operation Mongoose persisted into the summer of 1962, when the senior planners for the project found themselves debating four possible courses of action for the future. They could simply desist with

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<sup>200</sup> Memo for the Special Group Augmented, Consequences of U.S. Military Intervention in Cuba, August 8, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>201</sup> James W. Symington to the attorney general, "Meeting in Lansdale's Office - July 10," July 10, 1962, Box 211, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library. Symington was an aide to RFK and took notes on the meeting.

anti-Castro efforts and treat Cuba as a bloc nation, isolating it from the rest of the region so much as diplomatic pressure would allow. They could press ahead with an overthrow campaign employing all U.S. means short of direct military intervention. This plan would essentially be a Bay of Pigs redo, only this time U.S. forces would ride to the rescue of a Cuban uprising. Lastly, they could stage a provocation leading to an outright U.S. attack against Cuba, a notion RFK had suggested before for both Cuba and the Dominican Republic.<sup>202</sup>

### **A Personal Shadow War**

RFK knew that his brother could not afford another debacle like the Bay of Pigs, and yet at the same time RFK remained determined to act against Castro. The CIA was that attorney general's instrument for doing so, but RFK harbored significant doubts about the agency's abilities. Operation Mongoose was, after all, a reconstitution of much of the CIA's program leading up to the Bay of Pigs. Few new ideas were on offer from the CIA in the months afterward as RFK sought methods for dealing with Castro, and the new players in the picture such as Lansdale failed to instill confidence in RFK. The attorney general had gotten wind of some resistance to the idea of Lansdale serving as the operations chief for Mongoose. Initially RFK stepped in to support Lansdale, telling McCone that he hoped the CIA would cooperate fully with Lansdale and provide an able agency liaison for him.<sup>203</sup> But soon RFK too

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<sup>202</sup> Memorandum from the Deputy Director of the Office of Caribbean and Mexican Affairs to the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, July 18, 1962, FRUS, V. X, 1961-1962, 353.

<sup>203</sup> Memorandum for the record by John McCone, Nov. 29, 1961, FRUS V. X, 1961-1962, 276.

questioned whether Lansdale was the right coordinator for the Cuba project. The attorney general asked McCone for a frank assessment of both Lansdale and the project generally in January of 1962. McCone was pessimistic about the operation and told the attorney general so. Carrying it out would be difficult because of realities in Cuba, McCone said. Moreover, the CIA and the government generally were short on assets usable in a campaign against Castro. McCone promised the attorney general that the CIA was sparing no effort even so.<sup>204</sup> The man the agency put forward as the liaison for Lansdale, however, failed to inspire RFK.

William Harvey took the lead on Task Force W, the CIA's internal unit for the Cuba project. Harvey had made a name for himself as the spy behind the Berlin Tunnel, a successful joint effort by the CIA and British intelligence to tap Soviet communications cables snaking beneath East Berlin. In his new job back at headquarters Harvey oversaw the CIA's Miami base, called JMWAVE internally. He also worked closely with Lansdale and the attorney general in Washington, attending the many Cuba project meetings, 40 in all from January to October 1962.<sup>205</sup> RFK and Harvey came to loath each other and made no secret of their feelings. As far as RFK was concerned Harvey was incapable of getting anything done. Reflecting on Harvey, RFK in an interview said: "We'd been working with him for a year and no accomplishment."<sup>206</sup> Harvey returned the contempt, often referring to the attorney

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<sup>204</sup> Memorandum for the Record, Jan. 12, 1962 FRUS, V. X, 1961-1962, 287.

<sup>205</sup> Bayard Stockton, *Flawed Patriot*, p. 119.

<sup>206</sup> Robert Kennedy in recorded interview with John Bartlow Martin, April 30, 1964, p. 280, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

general as “that fucker.”<sup>207</sup> Harvey considered the Mongoose leadership meetings a waste of time, and if they came in the afternoon sometimes he drank at lunch before attending. He despised Lansdale as much as he did the attorney general. Harvey regarded Lansdale as a security threat and he actively resisted cooperating with him despite orders from the White House.<sup>208</sup> In Harvey’s eyes Lansdale’s hype, swagger and ignorance typified the mindset of all the Mongoose higher-ups, including the attorney general, McCone and even the president. They were all reckless amateurs playing at espionage in Harvey’s judgment.<sup>209</sup> In Harvey’s view, the Kennedys wanted the impossible, i.e. a clandestine overthrow of Castro. The administration would have to move openly against Castro if it truly hoped to bring him down. Harvey’s policy views counted for little, though. His job mostly boiled down to presenting options for CIA operations to the Special Group Augmented. He would listen to RFK and the other project leaders debate in detail what operations should be undertaken and grew ever more annoyed. One day the group would be eager for action. The next day they would be reluctant.<sup>210</sup> None of them were ever satisfied, least of all the attorney general.

All the dysfunction within Operation Mongoose frustrated RFK, but it also empowered him. A lack of consensus about what Operation Mongoose should do allowed RFK to push the program toward his goals, i.e. bleeding Castro with little more than a vague hope of ultimately overthrowing the Cuban ruler. While RFK

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<sup>207</sup> David Corn, *Blond Ghost*, p. 82.

<sup>208</sup> Bayard Stockton, *Flawed Patriot*, p. 119.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>210</sup> William Harvey in congressional testimony, June 25, 1975, JFK Assassination Records, Church Committee Boxed Files, Record Number 157-10002-10106.

could steer the policy of Operation Mongoose given his position and the group's inability to form a unified approach, the attorney general could not hope to see his policy implemented so long as he relied on the likes of Lansdale and Harvey. And that seems to have driven RFK to take a much more direct role in managing Operation Mongoose than he might have if people he regarded as more competent and effective were involved. RFK, like other senior officials working on the Cuba Project, was supposed to provide policy guidance, not operational management.<sup>211</sup> But from the beginning RFK and other Mongoose planners conducted detailed oversight of CIA activities, receiving weekly progress reports about the number of agents infiltrating Cuba, among other things.<sup>212</sup> The attorney general took matters further, going out of his way to involve himself deeply with a wide array of CIA activities related to Cuba. He would personally call midlevel CIA officers working on Mongoose and demand progress reports about infiltration teams and other issues.<sup>213</sup> RFK requested detailed information on specific operations and went so far as to ask if he could meet personally some of the CIA's operatives involved in covert actions he had seen described in various memoranda.<sup>214</sup> RFK also demanded daily reports from a CIA interrogation center established in Opa-Locka, Florida, just north

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<sup>211</sup> Lansdale, program review of the Cuba Project, March 2, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>212</sup> Lansdale to the Special Group Augmented, "Institutional Planning, Operation Mongoose," March 13, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library. This early progress report is indicative of a number that flowed to RFK on an almost weekly basis, each spelling out details of developments in the program. At the same time a number of developments were given orally to the group when deemed too sensitive for written records.

<sup>213</sup> Richard Helms, in recorded interview with WGH, 1986, WGBH Media Archives and Library, Boston. Available online as part of the Open Vault Collection: <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/wpna-e5183a-interview-with-richard-helms-1986>.

<sup>214</sup> Memo to McCone from Chief of Covert Action Staff Cord Meyer, Aug. 21, 1962, CIA/CREST.

of downtown Miami.<sup>215</sup> The Opa-Locka interrogation facility, formally called the Caribbean Admissions Center, came to life in February of 1962 as one of the first priorities of Operation Mongoose. The idea was to have a hub for incoming Cuban refugees, who could provide reports from inside Cuba and possible recruits for anti-Castro activities. The Opa-Locka center was soon producing about 800 reports a month, meaning the attorney general was sifting through huge amounts of raw intelligence.<sup>216</sup>

At one point RFK joined Harvey for one of his regular visits to the CIA Miami station. Kennedy roamed the halls of the bustling building and heard a telex machine clattering. He walked over, ripped the message out and began reading. Harvey erupted, tearing the paper from RFK's hands as he shouted about the impropriety of someone without proper clearance accessing classified materials.<sup>217</sup> Back in Washington, the attorney general asked to have a CIA officer assigned to him personally, someone who could make contacts with the Mafia and then answer directly back to him. Sam Halpern, Harvey's deputy, came to understand that RFK was actively pursuing connections to organized crime in the belief that the Mafia might have useful information on happenings inside Cuba stemming from the remnants of networks they used in the days before the revolution to run gambling, prostitution, drug running and the like. Halpern was told by Harvey that RFK would

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<sup>215</sup> McCone memorandum for the record, April 26, 1962, in the addenda of William Harvey congressional testimony July 11, 1975, JFK Assassination Records, Church Committee Boxed Files, Record Number 157-10011-10053.

<sup>216</sup> CIA memorandum titled "Operation Mongoose - End of Phase I," July 24, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>217</sup> Bayard Stockton, *Flawed Patriot*, p. 127.

provide the Mafia contacts and the times and places of meetings in the United States and Canada. The attorney general wanted the CIA to provide a man to go, and Harvey told Halpern to find someone.<sup>218</sup> Halpern did not look have to look far.

The Washington war room for Task Force W was a suite of offices facing an open area where secretaries and staff assistants gathered. Halpern, Harvey and another CIA man on the project, Bruce Cheever, each had offices facing the open area, which they dubbed the bullpen. Halpern strode into the bullpen and approached Charles Ford, a big, burly officer who Halpern figured could handle himself around Mafia toughs. Halpern and Ford came up with an alias for Ford, Charley Rocky Fiscollini. Ford went to see RFK, and during the spring and summer of 1962 Ford made a number of trips on behalf of the attorney general and then reported back to him either in person or over the telephone. Ford did not share the details of his reports to the attorney general with Halpern, and Halpern never saw any intelligence come of it. Halpern considered the arrangement a dangerous annoyance in any case. He did not like sending an officer blindly into meetings, and nothing useful seemed to come of the effort as far as Halpern could tell.<sup>219</sup>

All of this attention from the attorney general left many in the agency with the clear impression that Operation Mongoose was nothing less than the personal project of the president and his brother. The Kennedys themselves were in charge of the

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<sup>218</sup> Sam Halpern, in recorded interview with Brian Latell and Michael Warner for CIA internal history, April 7, 1998, JFK Assassination Records, CIA Misc., Record No. 104-10324-10000.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid. In 1975, Congressional investigators questioned Ford, who acknowledged working with RFK and Lansdale. Ford remained vague about his activities under oath, however. See Charles Ford memorandum of interview with Senate investigators, Sept. 19, 1975, JFK Assassination Records, CIA Misc., Record Number 104-10310-10119.

Cuba project, not the Special Group Augmented, not McCone or Lansdale or any of the other senior White House officials who were drawn in such as Taylor and Bundy. All directives for Operation Mongoose, as far as Sam Halpern understood, came directly from the attorney general. Lansdale, who kept an office at the Pentagon, answered to the attorney general as kind of chief of staff.<sup>220</sup> At times RFK seemed to treat virtually everyone at the CIA as his own personal staffers. One morning in May Helms got an unexpected call from the attorney general. Was Francis Gary Powers writing a book about his captivity in the Soviet Union? RFK heard that from the authors of a forthcoming book about the downing Powers' U-2 spy plane. He wanted Helms to find out whether it was true. Helms did. The answer was no.<sup>221</sup>

RFK kept up a palpable intensity few failed to recognize during high-level meetings of the senior leadership team of Mongoose held in the first half of 1962. The attorney general constantly complained about inaction. In March, RFK ordered Lansdale to research the feasibility of sabotaging Soviet ships sent to Cuba as aid from Moscow, an operation apparently of his own design.<sup>222</sup> Slowdowns on ongoing covert action angered him. A typical hitch stalled progress in March, when the Mongoose team struggled to deal with the problem of resupplying infiltration teams by air. The CIA had identified five drop sites and had a number of planes ready for use. But who would fly them, Americans or Cubans? Cuban pilots were thought to be unreliable. But putting Americans in the cockpit risked an embarrassing

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<sup>220</sup> Sam Halpern, in recorded interview by Ralph Weber for internal CIA history, Oct. 30, 1987, JFK Assassination Records, CIA Misc. files, Record No. 104-10324-10002.

<sup>221</sup> Memo from Helms to McCone on call from RFK, May 29, 1962, CIA/CREST.

<sup>222</sup> Minutes of Meeting of the Special Group on Mongoose, March 13, JFK Assassination Records, JCS Files, FOIA Series, NARA Record No. 202-1000-10196.

disclosure should one of the planes go down in Cuba. Mongoose planners debated and promised risk assessments. RFK lost patience and ordered them to get on with things. Could they not find some Cuban airlines pilots who had defected? In almost the same breath RFK ordered every effort made to find proof of any Cuban subversion activity in Latin America. The attorney general, Lansdale, Bundy, McCone and others agreed that if proof could not be found then the possibility of manufacturing such an incident should be examined. McCone promised to look into it.<sup>223</sup> Clear evidence of Castro backing communist guerrillas in Latin America could provide one pretext for direct military intervention, in this case probably with backing from multiple countries in Latin America.

Fingering Castro for subversion was not the only plan RFK contemplated when thinking up excuses for attacking Cuba openly. In March the attorney general asked the Mongoose leadership team whether the United States could make a fake Soviet fighter plane or perhaps acquire a real one clandestinely. The CIA estimated that, if given proper funding, multiple bogus MIG 17s and MIG 19s could be available in roughly six months to a year, with the Air Force manufacturing the aircraft. The CIA advised making the planes rather than trying to buy them. If word got out the United States had purchased Soviet fighters, then it would make using them in clandestine activity impossible. The obvious use for fake Soviet Fighters would have been launching them to attack U.S. targets in a staged provocation, a possible plan the Special Group Augmented openly considered as a course of

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<sup>223</sup> Minutes of Meeting of the Special Group on Mongoose, March 22, JFK Assassination Records, JCS Files, FOIA Series, NARA Record No. 202-10001-10195.

action.<sup>224</sup> RFK, of course, had urged the president to consider exactly such a plan immediately after the Bay of Pigs.<sup>225</sup> Within just a few months of the launch of Operation Mongoose RFK made his presence felt at every level of the project, pressing demands for progress with anger again and again. He became essentially what Halpern and other perceived him to be, a relentless incarnation of the president's anger toward Castro.

### **Castro and the Forces against Him**

Operation Mongoose did make some gains in the early part of 1962, despite the frustration and impatience RFK and others involved often felt. The heart of the effort remained getting operatives into Cuba to collect intelligence and begin organizing insurgent cells. The work was dangerous and slow going with low odds of success. Just 11 infiltration teams had quietly waded ashore on boats launching from the United States by the end of July and slunk into the Cuban countryside, where they tried to attract recruits while evading Castro's security forces. Nineteen other such missions had to be abandoned, making the infiltration success rate quite low. And of the teams inside Cuba only one managed to become an active guerrilla cell. In Pinar del Rio in western Cuba an infiltration team had managed to attract an estimated 250 supporters and remained active with the help of regular U.S. resupply efforts. The fact that the group was receiving outside support tended to encourage recruitment.

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<sup>224</sup> McCone to RFK, Aug. 15, 1962. Box 208, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library. The August memo is a follow-up report answering RFK's March question about getting Soviet aircraft or a convincing fakes.

<sup>225</sup> Memorandum from Attorney General Kennedy to the president, April 19, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. 10, 157.

But other teams elsewhere were not able to expand, and Lansdale estimated that little progress would come before October. No sabotage actions had been taken as of the end of July, but the CIA had selected targets and reported having resources in place inside Cuba to undertake such attacks.<sup>226</sup> Intelligence collection saw more success. The CIA had 477 CIA staff working on Operation Mongoose fulltime, with a large contingent working part time on the project additionally. Harvey reported that the CIA had 90 agents inside Cuba, and plans were in motion to add dozens more to the network as of mid 1962.<sup>227</sup>

None of this fundamentally changed the bleak picture in terms of the project's ultimate goal of bringing down Castro, however. Castro appeared to be going nowhere. The CIA estimated that at least a quarter of the Cuban population solidly supported Castro as of March 1962, despite a growing sense of disillusionment about the revolution. The vast majority of people in Cuba, meanwhile, neither supported nor resisted the Castro regime. Instead most had simply settled into a sense of resignation and tried to get on with life while coping with a pervasive economic crisis on the island. The Cuban economy hinged on the island's sugar crop, which the CIA projected to be the smallest in years in 1962. A small sugar crop meant less cash for Castro, who used money earned from sugar sales to purchase the many other goods needed on the island. Cuba was getting significant support from the communist bloc, but that would be enough to stave off shortages. That, the CIA believed, was possible

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<sup>226</sup> Review of Operation Mongoose, July 25, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>227</sup> CIA memorandum titled "Operation Mongoose - End of Phase I," July 24, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

leverage to be used in furthering rebel movements.<sup>228</sup> Yet nothing in the CIA's assessment suggested the likelihood of an uprising emerging inside Cuba any time soon, with or without U.S. support. As of July, McCone held out little hope for change. Castro still firmly held Cuba, where the regime's military and security forces were gathering strength. Castro had problems to be sure. Some popular support had slipped amid economic stagnation. But no serious divisions appeared within the regime, and on the whole Castro looked set to remain.<sup>229</sup>

RFK candidly expressed his displeasure to McCone as the project went forward. The attorney general had hoped that months of efforts by the Mongoose team would have yielded more action against the Castro regime. In terms of manpower, the U.S. intelligence network inside Cuba was the largest anywhere in the communist world as of July 1962 thanks to the added resources marshaled by Operation Mongoose. Yet Castro's forces still managed to stifle U.S. efforts to develop and foster resistance cells.<sup>230</sup> No Cuban rebel group operating without U.S. support had more than 200 people active on the island, where Castro's forces hunted insurgents mercilessly and kept up a steady pace of political executions. Still, some in the underground managed to stage acts of resistance. Sugar cane fields in the hinterlands would mysteriously catch fire well before the usual harvesting burns, ruining the crop. Guerrillas staged sporadic attacks on bridges, communication

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<sup>228</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, "The Situation and Prospects in Cuba," March 21, 1962, pp. 1-5, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>229</sup> Memorandum for the record, McCone notes for Special Group (Augmented) meeting, July 14, 1962, CIA/CREST. The meeting took place July 12.

<sup>230</sup> Review of Operation Mongoose, July 25, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified Files, John F. Kennedy Library.

facilities and militia outposts, prompting crackdowns by security forces.<sup>231</sup> The rebel activity was little more than a nuisance to the regime, however. A further disappointment came in the CIA's failure to uncover any subversive activity by Castro in Latin America. McCone had looked into a number of such intelligence reports and found they had no basis.<sup>232</sup>

Meanwhile, the CIA's efforts to kill Castro also sputtered. Harvey took on oversight of continuing assassination plots against Castro as part of his assignment to the Cuba project. Harvey, and those involved at the CIA generally, considered the effort to kill Castro and Operation Mongoose to be on separate but parallel tracks. Harvey and Lansdale discussed killing Castro on several occasions. Lansdale asked Harvey whether the CIA had the ability to kill Castro and if Harvey thought doing so would be a good idea. Harvey was deliberately vague in his replies, refusing to reveal the plots he knew to be underway. Harvey similarly refused to openly discuss assassination efforts with any other member of the Special Group Augmented despite his direct involvement. In April 1962, Harvey went to Miami, which he visited about every two or three weeks during this period. He gave another batch of poison pills to Roselli for a new attempt on Castro.<sup>233</sup> As before, Roselli was supposed to give the pills to a group of exiles willing to attempt the assassination, but this time the Cuban involved wanted a cache of weapons and explosives as a quid pro quo. So, Harvey

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<sup>231</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, "The Situation and Prospects in Cuba," March 21, 1962, pp. 22-23, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>232</sup> Minutes of Meeting of the Special Group on Mongoose, April 5, 1962, JFK Assassination Records, JCS Files, FOIA Series, NARA Record No. 202-10001-10193.

<sup>233</sup> William Harvey congressional testimony July 11, 1975, JFK Assassination Records, Church Committee Boxed Files, Record Number 157-10011-10053.

arranged to have U-Haul truck full of arms handed over to the exiles. After the exchange Roselli kept Harvey informed and reported that the pills and weapons had arrived in Cuba. Again as before, the plot came to nothing, and Harvey was left unclear whether any of Roselli's contacts had made any real effort to kill Castro.<sup>234</sup> Hopes for a quick end to the affair that way dimmed too.

What RFK knew about the CIA's assassination plans during this time remains somewhat murky. The attorney general certainly knew about the CIA's previous effort to poison Castro in 1961. Bissell gave him the basic details about that shortly after the Bay of Pigs. RFK heard about the plot again in May of 1962, when he requested a formal briefing from the CIA about it. It was a defensive move meant to thwart Hoover, who had been steadily unraveling the Ballatti case in a transparent effort to blackmail the Kennedys. Hoover needled RFK with FBI findings showing links between the CIA's anti-Castro program and organized crime, a clear dilemma for the attorney general. Giancana topped the list of Mafiosi RFK vowed to prosecute as part of his war on crime. Hoover had successfully made RFK squirm. The attorney general felt the need to state explicitly to Hoover and the CIA that he did not condone collusion with organized crime, not even against Castro. Kennedy told his CIA briefers: "I trust that if you ever try to do business with organized crime again—with gangsters—you will let the attorney general know." In conversations with Hoover RFK acknowledged that prosecuting Giancana would be difficult since the CIA connection would likely come to light, but he vowed to go forward

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<sup>234</sup> Church Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, interim report, Nov. 20, 1975, pp. 83-85.

nonetheless.<sup>235</sup> RFK's ongoing effort to use a CIA agent as his personal liaison to the Mafia suggests that the attorney general was of two minds on the matter. On the one hand RFK remained determined to press a campaign against organized crime. At the same time the attorney general displayed showed little hesitation in utilizing organized crime to press a campaign against Castro. Neither the clear conflict of interests nor the dubious legality of pursuing both campaigns at once seemed to give RFK pause. He worked on each front assiduously throughout his days as attorney general. In any case the mob was not helping. Castro clearly held them in check along with all his other enemies.

RFK became personally involved with the Cuban exile community during the early part of 1962 as well. The attorney general met in April with Jose Miro Cardona, who remained the president of the Cuban Revolutionary Council. After talks at the Justice Department RFK escorted Cardona to the White House for a secret meeting with the president. JFK told Cardona he looked depressed. Cardona was. For one thing a number of Cuban fighters taken prisoner during the Bay of Pigs remained in Castro's jails despite ongoing negotiations. But Cardona said the reason he was feeling low was the lack of action. He wanted to renew the fight against Castro and asked President Kennedy bluntly for arms and training camps to raise a new force. JFK told Cardona that approach was too conspicuous. The president said exiles would have to be trained on U.S. military bases, and he ordered Goodwin to look into ways of doing so quickly. JFK asked Cardona if his relations with the CIA were all

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<sup>235</sup> Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, pp. 171-172.

right and wanted to know the name of the officer with whom Cardona dealt. Cardona said he was happy with his arrangements with the CIA. The real problem, Cardona stressed, was inaction.<sup>236</sup>

Cardona felt compelled to do something, undertake some act that would demonstrate his group still held a leading role in the fight against Castro. Other rebel outfits were raising calls for action, exciting donors in the exile community with promises of hitting Castro hard. Cardona feared the council would collapse from defections to such groups unless they got into the fight somehow. JFK told Cardona that Castro could not be brought down by an internal uprising. Only a massive U.S. military attack could topple Castro. When the U.S. might be able to undertake such an intervention was the question then. The president did not have an answer. He told Cardona he would be contemplating it with his military advisers, implicitly holding out hope that such a U.S. move might at some point be possible.<sup>237</sup> That dangling promise from the president, seemingly always just out of reach, left Cardona and other exiles veering back and forth between rage and despair.

Infighting and restlessness among Cuban exile groups posed problems for Operation Mongoose. Lansdale warned the project leaders about the increasing factionalism within the exile community. He also warned the group about media attention the exiles groups attracted. As of April 1962 several news stories had appeared detailing the training activities of Cuban rebels in the United States,

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<sup>236</sup> Memo of meeting between JFK and Cardona, April 25, 1962, JFK Assassination Records, HSCA Segregated CIA Collection (microfilm), Record Number 104-10233-10025.

<sup>237</sup> Memo of meeting between JFK and Cardona, April 25, 1962, JFK Assassination Records, HSCA Segregated CIA Collection (microfilm), Record Number 104-10233-10025.

including a *New York Times* report April 19.<sup>238</sup> The CIA's Miami station, under the command of Ted Shackley, kept a close watch on the political currents within the Cuban exile community. Cardona was right. Disillusionment, confusion and anger welled among Cuban exiles. Why had the Kennedy administration taken no action against Castro since the Bay of Pigs? Would Castro just be left alone? Who could lead the exiles? Cardona had the backing of President Kennedy, but both looked weak in the eyes of many exiles. Cubans yearning for the downfall of Castro sensed a divide within the Kennedy administration, a hard line on the one side and a soft line on the other. Officials like Goodwin, in the minds of exiles, represented the soft line, striking a stance seemingly open to compromise and accommodation with Havana. RFK clearly stood with the hardliners in the minds of exiles, along with other notable administration figures such as Taylor and Vice President Johnson.<sup>239</sup> RFK more than the president stood as someone sympathetic to the cause of the most militant and determined Cuban exiles, and they began to seek him out.

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<sup>238</sup> Lansdale to the Special Group Augmented, "Operation Mongoose 13-19 April," April 19, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>239</sup> CIA report on Cuban exile opinion, May 23, 1962, JFK Assassination Records, HSCA Segregated CIA Collection (microfilm), Record Number 104-10227-10294.

## V. Priorities in the Global Struggle

### Gaining War Expertise

Even as Operation Mongoose took shape in the first half of 1962, Attorney General Kennedy increasingly contemplated Cold War struggling grounds beyond Cuba and Latin America. In January of that year RFK became a founding member of the Special Group on counterinsurgency, or Special Group (CI) as it became known within the administration. Taylor initially chaired the committee, which included RFK, McCone, Rusk, Lemnitzer and the heads of the Agency for International Development and the U.S. Information Agency. Answering directly to the president, the group was supposed to function as a high-level council dedicated to coordinating a government-wide response to the rising threat of communist insurgencies in Third World.<sup>240</sup> The idea was fairly radical for the time, at least to some within a U.S. national security establishment accustomed to thinking about threats in conventional or nuclear military terms. What did a few guerrillas in the jungles of Latin America matter when the Soviet war machine menaced Berlin? But President Kennedy took the threat of communist subversion in the Third World seriously and wanted everyone in his administration to do so. The inclusion of Taylor and RFK in the group signified the president's personal interest in the issue. For RFK, work on counterinsurgency enhanced his national security credentials by lengthening the list of countries he watched and exposing him to ideas and strategies regarded as cutting-

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<sup>240</sup> NSAM No. 124, Jan. 18, 1962, Box 210, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

edge thinking on foreign affairs by many of the New Frontiersmen. But Cuba stayed at the center of RFK's work on national security. No other country posed a bigger threat than Castro's Cuba in the minds of the attorney general and the president even as they eyed the rest of the Third World warily.

The counterinsurgency committee initially listed just three countries on its critical list, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.<sup>241</sup> Soon the list expanded to include Burma, Cambodia, Cameroon, Iran, Ecuador, Colombia, Guatemala and Venezuela.<sup>242</sup> At the behest of the counterinsurgency committee the CIA assembled a threat assessment for each of these countries. Most nations on the critical list posed a danger only in a distant sense. In Iran, for example, some ethnic groups and tribes, notably the Kurds, appeared restive but unable to mount a significant challenge to the sitting government. Burma had more than 10,000 insurgents active in roughly half a dozen different organizations. But none of them appeared to be linked to Moscow or Beijing, and the military government seemed to have the situation mostly under control. Like Burma, Colombia at a glance seemed to be cause for alarm. The CIA estimated that roughly 75 guerrilla bands roamed the country, causing more than 200 deaths each month. However, most insurgent groups were simply armed gangs without any meaningful political affiliation. Colombia's guerrillas were at bottom bandits, not communists. Guatemala, Ecuador and Venezuela raised greater concerns, in no small part because they stood within reach of Castro's influence. In each of those countries organized communist parties formed a regular feature of the

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<sup>241</sup> National Security Action Memorandum 165, June 16, 1962. DSNA, Item No. PR00028.

<sup>242</sup> National Security Action Memorandum No. 165, June 16, 1962. DSNA, Item No. PR00028.

political scene, cultivating armed factions and international support as they jockeyed for power against governments aligned for the most part with Washington. Still, the governments in question remained solidly anti-communist and seemed strong enough to handle armed leftist dissent.<sup>243</sup>

The standout case for the counterinsurgency committee, easily, was South Vietnam. As of mid 1962 Hanoi was making steady gains in its campaign to overrun the country and topple Diem. Viet Cong insurgent ranks had risen from roughly 8,000 in mid 1960 to as many as 19,000 two years later. These were just the fighters in regular units. Up to 100,000 part-time supporters backed the main insurgent force. Whole swaths of the territory in South Vietnam continued to fall into Viet Cong hands. Communist insurgents held sway in perhaps half the villages in South Vietnam. Increased efforts by the widely resented Diem government to quell the insurgency had so far failed to have much visible effect, and the threat of a coup or an assassination rose all the time.<sup>244</sup> The situation was quickly going from bad to worse and represented the most precarious Cold War struggling ground save Cuba and Berlin. No other country on the counterinsurgency critical list even came close in terms of needing immediate administration action.

The attorney general actually visited Saigon in person in February of 1962, stopping briefly in South Vietnam during an extensive goodwill trip through East Asia. Conceived and organized by the State Department, RFK's month-long regional

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<sup>243</sup> Memorandum for the Special Group: Counter-Insurgency Critical List, July 25, 1962, CIA/CREST.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

tour aimed to assure people in Asia that the Kennedy administration considered the region a top priority, despite all the attention the White House had given to Europe and Latin America. RFK, traveling with his wife Ethel, carried messages and gifts from the president as he visited leaders in Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, Hong Kong and South Vietnam.<sup>245</sup> But security issues in Southeast Asia overshadowed RFK's charm offensive, and the attorney general's pledges of U.S. support in the struggle against communism in Southeast Asia dominated news coverage of his trip. Speaking to reporters in Bangkok, the attorney general promised that President Kennedy would help Thailand fight communist threats. "This must be understood in a neighboring country," RFK said in a clear allusion to China. "I will take this opportunity to talk with the leaders of Thailand to discuss our common problems in order that I may report to the president upon my return to Washington."<sup>246</sup> In Vietnam, RFK struck a more overtly bellicose tone in public statements, even though the administration had hesitated to characterize the struggle in Vietnam as a war. "This is a new kind of war, but war it is in a very new sense of the word," RFK said. "It is a war fought not by massive divisions but secretly by terror, assassination, ambush and infiltration." RFK said the United States would "win" in Vietnam and promised U.S. forces would stay until victory. The attorney general, who had visited French Indochina with JFK in the fall of 1951, said the "American people understand and fully support this struggle. Americans have great affection for the people of Vietnam. I think the United States will do what is necessary to help a country that is trying to repel aggression with its

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<sup>245</sup> Judith Martin, *Washington Post, Times Herald*, Feb. 3, 1962.

<sup>246</sup> Associated Press, *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 19, 1962.

own blood, tears, and sweat.”<sup>247</sup> Some of what RFK said in Vietnam was no doubt intended to instill confidence within the ranks of Diem’s government, which regularly (and rightfully) questioned the administration’s commitment and intentions. At the same time the attorney general’s remarks in both Thailand and Vietnam reflected the essence of communist threats in the Third World as the Special Group (CI) saw them. A shadow war increasingly enveloped various quarters of the globe, and RFK clearly considered himself to be one of the vanguard fighters in this realm alongside the likes of Lansdale and Taylor.

The counterinsurgency committee quickly foundered, despite all the heady ambitions the president and its members held when conceiving it. Most of the committee’s activity involved popularizing counterinsurgency strategy within the government and the military ranks. Taylor headed up efforts to add counterinsurgency to the curriculum at the National War College, the Foreign Service Institute and the CIA Training Center. That initiative amounted to the most substantive work the committee ever did. The Special Group (CI) lacked the ability to do much more than contemplate and plan since it had no significant spending authority. Staff assistants assigned to the committee openly questioned whether it did anything substantive at all. Many meetings amounted to little more than briefings about situations already well understood within the national security establishment.<sup>248</sup> Mostly the committee wound up monitoring programs already underway in crisis

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<sup>247</sup> Terry Golway and Les Krantz, *JFK: Day by Day*, p. 119.

<sup>248</sup> Memo to the attorney general from John Nolan, Nov. 4, 1963, Box 210, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library. Nolan worked for RFK at the Justice Department.

countries. As the months wore on the Special Group (CI) grew so inactive that RFK and others involved openly contemplated simply disbanding it.<sup>249</sup> The committee ultimately failed to become a source of influence, power or even deep thinking about national security and unconventional warfare, because much of its intended work was already being done by the State Department, the Pentagon and the CIA, among other government agencies involved in foreign policy.

The Special Group (CI) held importance for RFK nonetheless. His presence on a senior foreign policy board personally vested by the president furthered RFK's overall authority on national security matters generally. RFK's inclusion on the counterinsurgency group in effect helped cement his mandate for national security policy making. The president's brother was not simply taking on foreign policy issues as they related to political crises, such as Cuba. The attorney general was to be a policymaker on national security matters whose voice held at least the same weight as the likes of Bundy, Taylor and McCone and perhaps more. This was the implicit message RFK's involvement in the counterinsurgency committee conveyed, and few in the administration could fail to understand it. Indeed administration figures involved in national security policy and foreign affairs generally began consulting the attorney general on a wide range of issues. RFK got involved at least peripherally with all kinds of foreign policy matters. For example, the State Department sent the attorney general a detailed report about plans for U.S. assistance to Yugoslavia, since the president was examining the issue with the National Security Council in January

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<sup>249</sup> Memorandum for the Attorney General from Thomas Davis, Jan. 7, 1963, Box 210, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

of 1962.<sup>250</sup> The State Department also kept the attorney general apprised of U.S. diplomacy in West New Guinea, the source of a bitter dispute between Indonesia and the Netherlands that the administration sought to ease.<sup>251</sup> Dozens of similar reports began coming to RFK as a matter of course through 1962 and 1963. The attorney general had the latest government updates on foreign affairs issues ranging from the internal tensions of Algeria to the status of Pan-African unity politics.<sup>252</sup> Basically any and every part of the world drawn into the Cold War fell under the attorney general's gaze, whether he took an active role or not. The regions where the Cold War struggle posed the highest political stakes for the Kennedy White House became places where RFK focused his attention. Cuba came first, but Southeast Asia increasingly rose in importance as well.

RFK had some reason for hope in Southeast Asia, where Laos at least seemed to stabilizing after a tense period early in 1962. The administration remained committed to its policy of keeping Laos neutral under a coalition government put together with help from international mediators. A cease-fire in place since May of 1961 began to fray in the early months of 1962 as the Hmong fighters backed by the Kennedy administration through a secret CIA program faced off with the Pathet Lao and allied forces from North Vietnam. Pathet Lao forces moved into the area around the town of Nam Tha to counter the buildup of Hmong fighters there. Phoumi, the

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<sup>250</sup> Memorandum to the president: U.S. Policy and Assistance Programs Toward Yugoslavia, Jan. 15, 1962, Box 194, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>251</sup> Memorandum for the Attorney General, July 16, 1962, Box 204, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>252</sup> Roger Hilsman to RFK, Aug. 10, 1962, Box 204, Classified File, Attorney General Papers, John F. Kennedy Library. Hilsman, a senior official at the State Department, frequently reached out to RFK with department reports and memos covering a wide range of issues.

Laotian leader and U.S. ally, responded by sending roughly 5,000 troops and artillery units to the town in order to prevent it from falling under communist control. On May 6, 1962, four North Vietnamese battalions overran Nam Tha, totally routing the Royal Laotian Army forces Phoumi had sent. The communist forces then began moving toward the nearby border of Thailand in a move that raised alarm in Washington.<sup>253</sup> In a stroke, months of diplomacy unraveled, and Laos appeared on the edge of collapse. The Kennedy administration still had no wish to launch a major military intervention in Laos. All the strategic calculations RFK and others mulled the previous year remained unchanged. At the same time the White House felt the need for a show a force in light of events, a military move that would halt communist advances in Laos and hopefully restore negotiations. Within days the president decided to send roughly 4,000 troops to Thailand, where they would join another 1,000 troops already there. Coordinating with Thai forces, U.S. troops would help secure the border and remain poised to launch a joint incursion into Laos if the situation deteriorated further.<sup>254</sup> The highly publicized U.S. troop deployment had a chilling effect on the situation. The communist halted their advances. Tensions eased, and negotiations resumed.<sup>255</sup>

On June 19 Georgi Bolshakov contacted RFK. Could they meet that day? Around 4:00 p.m. Bolshakov appeared in RFK's office at the Justice Department bearing what he said was a message sent personally from Khrushchev. The message

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<sup>253</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, pp. 346-351.

<sup>254</sup> Robert Udick, United Press International, *Washington Post, Times Herald*, May 16, 1962.

<sup>255</sup> Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, p. 525.

was secret, Bolshakov said, given verbally to him and not shared with others at the Soviet embassy in Washington. The Soviet premier wanted the president to know that he was very pleased with the settlement in Laos, evidently referring to the pledges both leaders made in Vienna to keep the country neutral. According to Bolshakov, Khrushchev felt that settlement of Laos was a vital step in improving relations between the Soviet Union and the United States. The U.S. troop presence in Thailand, however, complicated things, Bolshakov said. Khrushchev understood, Bolshakov stressed, that the White House sent U.S. forces to Thailand in case violence in Laos worsened. Now that the situation was stable, though, Khrushchev wondered if perhaps U.S. forces might leave Thailand. Bolshakov asked the attorney general what he thought of the message, emphasizing again that it came directly from Khrushchev. RFK said he had no comment but would pass the message along to the president, which he did.<sup>256</sup> President Kennedy seized the opportunity to further de-escalate the situation, and U.S. forces began a publicized withdrawal from Thailand in July.<sup>257</sup> Far bigger issues than the fate of Laos loomed on the horizon when RFK and Bolshakov talked that time, however. In the months ahead the destiny of Laos would seem almost trivial in light of larger developments. Still, RFK's intimate involvement in the gamesmanship of the Cold War crisis of the moment illustrated his new overall role. On that day Laos stood as the most important Cold War dispute,

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<sup>256</sup> Memo from RFK to JFK, June 19, 1962, Box 241, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>257</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, p. 350.

and RFK played the role to which he had become accustomed – a minister without portfolio yet thoroughly involved in national security affairs.

### **Castro's Menace**

The possibility of the Soviets establishing military bases in Cuba had long troubled RFK, and he discussed the prospect with members of the Mongoose team. He wanted firm action plans in case Soviet bases in fact appeared on the island.<sup>258</sup> Another possibility loomed as well. What if the Soviets established a conventional military base in Cuba, garrisoning troops as a deterrent against U.S. military action? The administration always kept alive the option of a U.S. invasion of Cuba in the right circumstances, but that would be much more difficult to do with Soviet troops stationed on the island.<sup>259</sup> The Mongoose team could offer little in the way of action plans in case of a sudden Soviet military presence in Cuba. Progress reports on Operation Mongoose brought no evidence of significant gains on any fronts, despite months of efforts. CIA operatives who had infiltrated Cuba made little headway in launching activities given the heavy presence of security forces.<sup>260</sup> Castro's police state showed no cracks. McCone increasingly shared RFK's evident sense of frustration with the project as the months unfolded. The CIA director wondered whether a more aggressive approach was needed. Perhaps the administration should

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<sup>258</sup> Lansdale progress memo to the Special Group Augmented, June 14, 1962. Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>259</sup> Memorandum for the Special Group Augmented, U.S. Policy in the Event USSR Establishes a Base in Cuba, May 31, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>260</sup> Progress report, Operation Mongoose, June 27, 1962, Box 193 Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

search for some reason to undertake a swift military intervention in the near future. McCone, Taylor and other project leaders discussed whether the announcement of a mass execution of prisoners from the Bay of Pigs could perhaps offer a pretext for U.S. military action. In any case all agreed to think further about how to concoct reasons for launching an outright war on Cuba.<sup>261</sup>

In April, a CIA assessment of the prospects for an outright military invasion reached the attorney general. Its conclusions fell largely in line with thinking among the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the matter. A U.S. invasion would likely defeat Castro's forces in a matter of days, according to CIA estimates, but a prolonged struggle for the fate of the country would certainly then ensue. Castro and his fighters were well aware that the odds of holding key cities against an American military onslaught were low, so they were likely to mount a guerrilla campaign from the country's interior after mustering initial resistance. The CIA figured Castro's guerrillas would find enough support to sustain themselves in rural areas, where the regime had already stashed weapons in anticipation of going to ground. An underground resistance network would thrive in the countryside, infiltrate the major cities and make effective governance exceedingly difficult for either a U.S. occupation force or a new regime installed by Washington.<sup>262</sup> In short, the assessment said that direct U.S. military intervention in Cuba could topple Castro but would also set loose a whole range of new and virtually unending problems. For the moment the administration lacked a

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<sup>261</sup> Minutes of Meeting of the Special Group on Mongoose, April 5, 1962, JFK Assassination Records, JCS Files, FOIA Series, NARA Record No. 202-10001-10193.

<sup>262</sup> Probably Reactions to a U.S. Military Intervention in Cuba, CIA Office of National Estimates, April 10, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library. This document declassified per author request.

politically viable reason to consider such move in any case. By the spring of 1962 McCone felt that intelligence suggesting Castro was engaged in subversive activities in Latin America was overblown. He had looked into a number of such reports and found they had no basis.<sup>263</sup> Still, Castro had to go one way or another. This remained the unwavering administration policy, set forth by the president explicitly. Pursuing Castro's downfall had little visible hope for success, but this was true of other Cold War efforts underway in the administration too. The odds of holding communists at bay in Southeast Asia never looked especially good, yet the Kennedy administration persisted. Prospects for nuclear arms reduction seemed dim, yet the administration pressed ahead there as well. Reforming Latin America through the Alliance for Progress was perhaps the most fanciful administration mission, and yet they continued with the effort. In many ways Cuba was no different than the many other intractable foreign policy problems troubling the Kennedy administration. Castro's Cuba represented a Cold War problem that needed constant working even if solutions were not readily available.

With military intervention simply unrealistic, Lansdale's White House bosses ordered him to come up with more options in line with the plan that called for a broad U.S. campaign against Castro using everything short of invasion and occupation. Lansdale responded by circulating a lengthy policy paper that had a very clear recommendation as its bottom line: Unleash the CIA, which since the Bay of Pigs been prohibited from large-scale paramilitary activities against Cuba. Harvey put

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<sup>263</sup> Minutes of Meeting of the Special Group on Mongoose, April 5, 1962, JFK Assassination Records, JCS Files, FOIA Series, NARA Record No. 202-10001-10193.

forward some possible actions the CIA could undertake if the Special Group Augmented loosened the reins. The White House should authorize the creation of up to 15 commando teams numbering about a dozen men each, Harvey suggested. The teams would primarily be Cuban rebels trained and armed by the CIA but would include non-Cuban CIA contractors as well, paramilitary experts who could help lead missions. The teams would launch hit-and-run sabotage attacks inside Cuba and stash weapons to be used by oppositionists heading a call for revolt when the right moment arose. The CIA could cultivate oppositionists, Harvey said, by creating resistance cells in key areas around Cuba. CIA operatives working in small teams could sneak into Cuba and begin forming an underground resistance network. Harvey suggested 12 to 15 such teams given an expected loss rate of 25 percent. Harvey also advocated the creation of 20 small guerrilla bands who would operate in rural areas of Cuba conducting sabotage missions. Unlike the commando teams, these fighters would be in Cuba full-time, resupplied periodically with U.S. airdrops. He predicted a 50 percent survival rate for men in these teams.<sup>264</sup>

What Harvey proposed, essentially, was a renewal of the mayhem the CIA spread across Cuba during the run-up to the Bay of Pigs invasion. The only real difference between the CIA's old Cuba plan and its new Cuba plan was the absence of an invasion force. As a substitute the CIA suggested a diplomatic pressure campaign orchestrated by the State Department and a propaganda offensive that consisted mainly of airdropping leaflets and pumping misinformation into the Cuban

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<sup>264</sup> Memorandum for the Special Group Augmented, Aug. 8, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified Files, John F. Kennedy Library.

airwaves. This was supposed to stoke a revolution in a country whose ruling regime rivaled East Germany in its effectiveness at repression. For his part Taylor balked at the CIA's proposed expansion and urged President Kennedy to adopt a more restrained approach going forward in advice he shared with RFK and the other key players on Mongoose. Phase two of the operation, Taylor said, should essentially seek to contain Cuba since Castro did not look to be going anywhere. Economic pressure should be maintained. Some sabotage should go forward. But in Taylor's eyes Operation Mongoose should be little more than a holding exercise. As of early August the president agreed with Taylor and ordered Operation Mongoose to keep to a modest agenda.<sup>265</sup> But pressure for something more was building.

Harvey's initial plan for Mongoose's second phase, if approved, would have drawn in the Pentagon and raised visibility of U.S. action, something the president made clear he did not want. The CIA wanted to use U.S. military bases for training exiles, despite the president's explicit stance against doing so. Harvey insinuated that the White House lacked guts. He insisted that the CIA could and would do much more if "higher authority" expanded their mandate. Generally the CIA agreed with Lansdale's assessment that a revolt inside Cuba was possible if the administration were willing to demonstrate that it would not let the uprising fail. Castro's security forces remained strong enough to effectively squelch any internal dissent that might lead to revolt. But an uprising could be launched with U.S. support, the CIA argued. The CIA believed that if the administration kept up robust covert operations and

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<sup>265</sup> Memo from Taylor to JFK, Aug. 17, 1962, FRUS, Vol. X, 1961-1962, 380.

propaganda activities that a widespread revolt could materialize inside Cuba by late 1963. However, such a rebellion would likely only survive a few days without direct military intervention to support it. Otherwise Castro's security forces would simply snuff it out. Therefore, Harvey argued, the administration needed to make a firm commitment to intervene militarily to save a Cuban uprising when it appeared. Without such a commitment, the operation was essentially pointless, in Harvey's view.<sup>266</sup>

By mid August the Special Group Augmented settled on an outline for the second phase of Mongoose. Lansdale sketched the plans in a memo. The goals for the most part were modest and in line with activities from the first phase. The operation in these months aimed to discredit the regime through propaganda, sow division in the upper rungs of Castro's government, disrupt the economy, assist Cuban exile groups and Latin American countries in efforts to take action against Cuba and ready for the moment when an uprising appeared. The plan for phase two included a number of steps to be taken in the diplomatic and political realm to isolate and undermine Cuba. The State Department was supposed to continue efforts to get Cuba ejected from political blocs in the hemisphere. Propagandistic radio broadcasts, already filling airwaves hour after hour any given day inside Cuba, would continue.

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<sup>266</sup> CIA memorandum, Operation Mongoose - End of Phase I, July 24, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

Print propaganda such as cartoons and leaflets were to arrive in Cuba via balloon drops.<sup>267</sup>

But, importantly, phase two also called for major sabotage operations. The CIA was to orchestrate attacks targeting key infrastructure such as electrical plants, refineries, microwave stations and the like. Additionally, the CIA planned to renew destruction of Cuban agricultural products such as sugar, meaning more arson attacks on farms. They would also move to poison fuel supplies in Cuba by slipping in destructive additives. The CIA would either use saboteurs already in Cuba or commando teams that would land secretly, conduct a mission and then flee. The risk level would increase. The agents involved in the attacks might lose their lives. The conspicuousness of the attacks might cost the administration the plausible deniability it craved.<sup>268</sup> The Special Group Augmented nonetheless approved the plan for phase two and notified the president.<sup>269</sup> Action could not come soon enough as far as the president was concerned. He personally pressed Taylor to speed up actions planned for the second phase of Mongoose owing to recent intelligence suggesting that the Soviet Union might be contemplating the introduction of advanced missiles in Cuba.<sup>270</sup> What restraint JFK felt clearly faded as the prospect of missiles in Cuba loomed ever larger in the picture.

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<sup>267</sup> Phase II, Operation Mongoose, Aug. 31, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>268</sup> Phase II, Operation Mongoose, Aug. 31, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>269</sup> Memorandum for the president from Maxwell Taylor, Aug. 17, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>270</sup> National Security Action Memorandum No. 181, Aug. 23, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

Bundy applied pressure too, sending a memo to RFK, Taylor, Rusk, McNamara and others saying that the appearance of any Soviet missiles in Cuba, regardless of whether or not they included nuclear warheads, would dramatically change the military and political calculation for the region.<sup>271</sup> In the summer of 1962, as the missile crisis approached, RFK became one of the administration officials who literally watched Cuba, receiving regular CIA photographic evaluation reports. The briefs described dozens and dozens of aerial photographs taken of Cuba through the summer months of 1962. U.S. spy planes overflew the island snapping pictures of military areas in the hope of finding suspicious activity. They found plenty of activity, but nothing definitive emerged to confirm the fears RFK and others harbored about Soviet bases. Cuban soldiers busily dug trenches, filled arms depots and positioned anti-aircraft weapons. Airmen practiced bombing and strafing.<sup>272</sup> On the whole Cuba looked like a country girding for war, an entirely appropriate preparation given that the administration was actively seeking ways to provoke one. Castro's spies had likely gotten wind of at least some of the administration's plans. McCone for one believed Cuban agents had thoroughly infiltrated the exile community in

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<sup>271</sup> Probable military, political, and psychological impact of the establishment of surface-to-air missiles or surface-to-surface missiles which could reach the U.S., Aug. 31, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>272</sup> See Box 209, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library. The box contains multiple CIA photographic evaluation reports on Cuba from the months immediately prior to the missile crisis. Documents declassified per author appeal.

Florida. Castro seemed to anticipate most any CIA move.<sup>273</sup> The CIA, on the other hand, had little inkling of what Castro was actually planning.

### **Action by the Exiles and the CIA**

In Havana one evening late in August, shortly before midnight, a series of explosions rocked the city. Two gunboats carrying young militant exiles from Florida had quietly moved close to the city and unleashed a barrage of shellfire toward a hotel used by Soviet advisors to Cuba. The attackers then slipped away in the darkness and headed back toward Florida. Within days they were speaking openly in Miami to reporters about the strike, which battered the hotel and surrounding buildings but caused no deaths or serious injuries. The attackers were from the Student Revolutionary Directorate, a relatively new group known in the exile community by its Spanish acronym, DRE. They said they acted to further the cause of Cuban freedom, that they could not stand idly while Soviets pulled Cuba into the communist bloc.<sup>274</sup> The attack marked the most forceful strike against Cuba since the Bay of Pigs. Castro immediately pointed a finger at Washington, but the administration could take neither credit nor blame. The DRE, like many other Cuban exile groups, were acting on their own against Castro.

By mid 1962, hundreds of Cuban exile outfits had appeared. The FBI and the CIA struggled to keep track of them all. The CIA drew up a roster of the various

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<sup>273</sup> John McCone, recorded interview with WGBH 1986, Media Library and Archives, Boston. Available online as part of the Open Vault collection: <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/wpna-b3557c-interview-with-john-mccone-1986-2>.

<sup>274</sup> Associated Press, *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 26, 1962.

groups, and McCone gave the list to RFK and other members of the Mongoose team.<sup>275</sup> The Liberation Army of Cuba, known also by its Spanish acronym ELC, was similar to the DRE, and both were typical of the militant exile outfits coming to life around this time. Made up mostly of former soldiers who fought in the revolution with Castro, ELC leaders began working together in the fall of 1961. They aimed to launch amphibious guerrilla attacks against targets in Cuba and, eventually, overthrow Castro and establish a democratically elected government. They set to fundraising among the exile community. By June 1962, according to U.S. intelligence, the ELC had finalized a lease of a small key of the coast of Florida to serve as a base of operations. In July the group registered itself with the Justice Department, a move clearly intended to earn the group the law enforcement pass given to exile outfits engaged in illegal activity within the United States.<sup>276</sup>

On September 24, 1962, the attorney general phoned the CIA deputy director and asked the agency to send an officer to see him and discuss a sabotage operation RFK heard that some Cuban exiles were planning. Ford went that day to the Justice Department and met the attorney general alone in his office. RFK explained that the ELC was about to stage a major attack inside Cuba and hoped to launch a general uprising before the end of the month. The attorney general heard all this through contacts of his own, he explained to Ford. Some months back a senior ELC figure,

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<sup>275</sup> Lansdale to the Special Group Augmented, "Status of Requested Studies, Operation Mongoose," June 8, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>276</sup> Cuban Counterrevolutionary Handbook, July 31, 1964, JFK Assassination Records, Record Number 1993.08.11.14:08:32:620006. An initial version of the handbook was written in October 1962, but the later version has more complete histories of the groups and more legible text in the surviving carbon copies.

Ernesto Betancourt, met personally with RFK and revealed their overall aims. RFK warned Betancourt about moving too quickly, pointing to the failed Hungarian uprising of 1956, when Soviet forces brutally suppressed a dissident movement. Betancourt, for his part, told the attorney general that the ELC wanted U.S. backing but not through the CIA. Like many exile groups, the ELC distrusted the agency deeply because of the Bay of Pigs. Now the ELC was going forward with attack plans. Betancourt had informed RFK through an intermediary. RFK was unsure what to make of it. He wanted to know whether Betancourt was a serious player and if ELC's attack plan had any chance of success. If the ELC could deal blows against Castro, then the White House had use for them. RFK told Ford to contact Betancourt and gave him a phone number. He told Ford to reveal himself as neither a CIA agent nor a messenger for the attorney general.<sup>277</sup> Ford was to remain vague about his affiliation when contacting the Cubans, who most likely could not have been fooled.

The following day Ford was at his desk in the bullpen when the phone rang. It was the attorney general, who told him to seek out Betancourt immediately because he and some of the key men from the ELC were in Washington but leaving for Florida shortly. Ford found Betancourt, who took Ford to a house on the outskirts of Washington where several other ELC operatives had gathered. They explained their plan, which sounded implausible to Ford. The exiles said they were orchestrating an uprising involving as many 15,000 people, who would take to the streets in just five days. They wanted U.S. help in the form of arms and ammunition but said the

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<sup>277</sup> Charles Ford memo on meeting with the attorney general, Sept. 25, 1962, JFK Assassination Records, HSCA Segregated CIA Collection (microfilm), Record Number 104-10171-10355.

uprising would go forward with or without it. If the Americans wanted to get involved, the exiles told Ford, then they needed to provide the ELC with a representative who could authorize all requested arms transfers within two days. Ford told the exiles that their timetable was likely too tight even if higher-ups were inclined to get involved but said he would pass the information along nonetheless. Ford found Harvey and related what he heard from the exiles. Harvey and the rest of the CIA team thought the ELC plan was doomed to fail. The group did not seem capable of conjuring thousands of counterrevolutionaries inside Castro's police state. Even if they did, Castro's forces would surely destroy them in a stroke. The CIA wanted nothing to do with the plot. Harvey told Ford to report back to RFK. The attorney general listened intently to Ford's briefing and agreed with Harvey's decision. Jumping into such a plot at this stage would be pointless. He wondered whether Betancourt and the other ELC men were being "taken in," evidently suggesting that perhaps the group had fallen victim to plots by Castro's agents. Still, if the uprising did indeed take shape, RFK said, the administration would move to support it. Nothing significant ever came of the ELC scheming. Regardless, RFK told Ford to keep in touch with Betancourt and the group. The administration wanted to help groups like the ELC, RFK said.<sup>278</sup> That was U.S. policy.

RFK and others working on Operation Mongoose remained alert for the off chance that some exile group would successfully attempt to launch an uprising inside Cuba. Intelligence suggested that October 1962 was the soonest a new uprising might

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<sup>278</sup> Charles Ford memo on meeting with Betancourt et alia, Sept. 28, 1962, JFK Assassination Records, HSCA Segregated CIA Collection (microfilm), Record Number 104-10171-10355.

be able to commence, should one be afoot.<sup>279</sup> But no real cause for hope ever materialized. The rumors were just that, and the Mongoose team concentrated mainly on its own plans. At the end of the summer of 1962, however, little had happened on any front. And by early October RFK and the other Mongoose overseers forcefully demanded more action from Harvey and Lansdale.<sup>280</sup> The president made clear that he too personally wanted to see some strikes against Cuba.<sup>281</sup> Bundy pushed as well, calling Lansdale personally and asking about the best way to get a Cuban rebel group going.<sup>282</sup> Lansdale blamed the CIA for lack of initiative and vowed to break what he described as a deadlock. “When the president asks for something, he should get it,” Lansdale wrote to RFK. “He has asked for action... I believe you will have to hit the CIA over the head personally. I can then follow through, to get the action desired.”<sup>283</sup> Lansdale urged RFK to lash out at Helms personally for lack of CIA initiatives on Cuba.<sup>284</sup> In fact the CIA had many options for covert activities ready to go if approved by the White House.

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<sup>279</sup> Lansdale, program review of the Cuba Project, March 2, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>280</sup> Action proposals, Mongoose, Oct. 11, 1962, Box 211, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>281</sup> Sabotage program, Mongoose, Lansdale to RFK, Oct. 15, 1962, Box 211, Attorney General Papers, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>282</sup> Lansdale to the attorney general, “Cuban Operations,” Oct. 15, 1962, Box 211, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>283</sup> Lansdale to RFK, “Sabotage Program, Mongoose,” Oct. 15, 1962, Box 211, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>284</sup> Lansdale to RFK, “Mongoose Meeting 2:30 p.m. Today. Introductory Remarks,” Oct. 16, 1962, Box 211, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

Looking for sabotage targets, the CIA had identified 23 Cuban vessels that came and went from Europe.<sup>285</sup> Harvey asked RFK and the other operation overseers for a free hand to attack them. He wanted to field Cuban operatives in seaports around the world, where they would monitor harbors for Cuban vessels and place timed explosives on ones they could reach. Harvey said that the ships marked for attack would essentially be fleeting targets of opportunity, precluding specific approval from RFK and the Mongoose team in Washington. No conclusive evidence of U.S. involvement would likely emerge from the attacks, Harvey said. They would be made to look like Cuban dissident actions. Yet the operations would nonetheless stir accusations against Washington from Havana.<sup>286</sup> Here was the essence of the problem that plagued Operation Mongoose. More had to be done, as RFK had repeatedly stressed. The CIA stood ready to ramp up operations, but doing so brought extremely high political risks. RFK wanted a viable clandestine campaign against Castro that would bring results. But he wanted sabotage operations against Castro without a visible U.S. hand and no overt threat U.S. military intervention, per the president's guidance.<sup>287</sup>

In early October, finally, the finger pointing and foot dragging that generated so many complaints from RFK seemed to be giving way to genuine momentum. The

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<sup>285</sup> Action proposals, Mongoose, Oct. 11, 1962, Box 211, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>286</sup> Sabotage of Cuban-Owned Ship, Harvey to Lansdale, Oct. 8, 1962, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library. This document declassified per author appeal.

<sup>287</sup> Review of Operation Mongoose, July 25, 1962, Box 193, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library. RFK's makes clear his desire for action without visible U.S. involvement by checking policy options in Lansdale's memo that outlined such an approach as the cornerstone of phase II.

CIA generated a task list of sabotage operations and submitted it for formal approval from the Special Group Augmented and the president. McCone and Harvey planned to unleash what amounted to a wave of terrorist attacks. An eight-man demolition team was going to destroy a key railroad bridge. Two Cuban frogmen were going to bomb a ship at anchor in a Cuban harbor. Another Cuban agent was going to toss a grenade into the garden of the Chinese embassy in Havana from an adjacent rooftop. Oil drum mines were to be scattered in one or more Cuban harbors. Saboteurs would attack a power plant, a nickel mine, a sulfur stockpile and two Texaco oil refineries. Meanwhile, attackers in speedboats would shoot up oil tankers offshore in the hope setting them afire.<sup>288</sup> Bundy personally took the CIA plan to the president, who nixed the proposal for oil drum mines but approved everything else. In fact he ordered the CIA to go further, widening the proposed attacks on shipping to include Cuban vessels coming and going from any port in communist bloc countries, not just Cuba.<sup>289</sup> The fact that the president himself approved, among other things, a singular grenade attack on civilians underscored the personal involvement of both the Kennedy brothers in Operation Mongoose. The CIA was not running amok in Cuba under Kennedy's watch. In fact the president inserted himself heavily into the details of operations, using RFK as his proxy.

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<sup>288</sup> Operation Mongoose, Sabotage Proposals, Oct. 16, 1962, Box 211, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library. This document released per author appeal.

<sup>289</sup> Memorandum for the Special Group (Augmented) from General Carter, Oct. 17, 1962, Box 211, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library. This document declassified per author's appeal.

## **RFK and the Missile Crisis**

The Cuban Missile Crisis has generated an enormous amount of scholarship, which does not need repeating in full here. The most important writings on the crisis for this dissertation are the invaluable transcripts of White House recordings made during the crisis and the newest books on the subject, which tackle key questions about RFK's role. In his memoir of the crisis, *Thirteen Days*, RFK portrayed himself as a voice for peace and compromise during tense days of discussions by the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, a.k.a. ExComm. In the years afterward, Schlesinger and other Kennedy loyalists furthered the myth of RFK as a dove among hawks during the crisis.<sup>290</sup> But the White House recordings and the newest scholarship reveal that RFK consistently joined those advocating military action.

RFK had reason to deepen his longstanding concerns about the presence of missiles in Cuba by the first week of October 1962. Bolshakov reached out to the attorney general October 5 with a new message from Khrushchev. The two intermediaries had maintained their rapport despite some difficulties and had even grown fond of one another.<sup>291</sup> Bolshakov had visited with RFK at Hickory Hill in addition to the Justice Department, and RFK at one point even considered a trip to the Caucasus with the Soviet military intelligence officer. During one of their exchanges early in 1962 RFK talked about the tense relationship between the White House and the military, questioning Bolshakov on whether a similar dynamic existed in the Kremlin. The attorney general was blunt with the Soviet envoy, saying factions

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<sup>290</sup> Sheldon Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myths versus Reality*, p. 34.

<sup>291</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 501.

within the Pentagon were eager for a clash with the Soviet Union and believed the United States could prevail.<sup>292</sup> Now Bolshakov delivered what RFK clearly considered troubling news. Khrushchev wanted the Kennedys to know, Bolshakov said, that the Kremlin was placing defensive weapons in Cuba. The Soviet envoy remained in the dark about the true nature of the buildup in Cuba, though RFK obviously harbored suspicions. Intelligence reports had for months noted increased shipping to Cuba and secretive happenings on Cuban docks. RFK was visibly tense when Bolshakov delivered the latest message. There was none of the usual small talk the two had come to share. RFK's normally casual manner with Bolshakov gave way to a palpable formality as the attorney general took notes and promised to pass the word to the president.<sup>293</sup> RFK presumably did in fact transmit the message to the president, as he reliably had done in the past with similar messages. But no documentary evidence available specifically notes RFK passing such a message to the president.

In any event, ten days later the CIA finally produced proof of what RFK, McCone and others had long suspected, works for a Soviet missile base in Cuba. Ray Cline, CIA deputy director for research and analysis and head of the photo interpretation center, identified the telling reconnaissance photos, sent them to Bundy and the Kennedys and briefed all of them. McCone was away from Washington, so Cline told Bundy about the pictures late in the day of October 15. Early the next morning Cline arrived at the White House with the photographs in hand so he could

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<sup>292</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, pp. 184-186.

<sup>293</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, p. 219.

formally brief Bundy. Cline found RFK with Bundy, who had alerted the attorney general after getting the initial word from Cline. RFK had come to see the evidence himself, before the president was formally informed. Bundy, known for his relaxed demeanor, took the news calmly as Cline and another CIA man went over the images. But RFK grew visibly irate and talked of settling scores. He quoted his father Joseph Kennedy, who had told his boys ‘don’t get mad, get even.’<sup>294</sup> The crisis meetings began immediately but did not initially involve the president at the White House. The national security team instead gathered in Rusk’s office at the State Department. RFK effectively chaired the sessions in the president’s absence, his ownership of Cuba policy at this point unquestioned. After only two sessions at the State Department the meetings moved to the White House, where the coming and going of senior officials would appear less conspicuous.<sup>295</sup>

The situation was much more dire than RFK and the others in the administration knew. The missiles seen in the reconnaissance photographs were only part of the military measures the Soviets undertook secretly in Cuba. The Kremlin had managed to send more than 42,000 Red Army troops to Cuba to help repel an invasion. Additionally Moscow had shipped battlefield tactical nuclear warheads to Cuba and authorized on-site commanders to use them at their discretion if fighting erupted. If the United States attacked, the Soviets were ready to launch nuclear

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<sup>294</sup> Ray S. Cline, in recorded interview, March 28-30, 1993, session #1, Ray S. Cline miscellaneous papers, collection number 94026, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CA.

<sup>295</sup> Ray Cline, in recorded interview, March 28-30, 1993, session #2, Ray S. Cline miscellaneous papers, collection number 94026, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CA.

weapons against the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo, a scenario that would almost certainly have escalated to a general nuclear exchange.<sup>296</sup>

On the first day of the ExComm White House meetings, Tuesday, October 16, the group quickly established that the missile sites were still under construction, with the whereabouts of the warheads unknown. The president contemplated a number of options in formulating a possible response. RFK was quick to argue that the logical progression of any response by the administration was an outright invasion of Cuba. The White House recording system captured this exchange between the president and the attorney general during ExComm debate October 16:

PRESIDENT KENNEDY: Well this is really talking about are two or three different potential operations. One is to strike just on these three bases. The second is the broader one that Secretary McNamara was talking about, which is on the airfields and on the SAM sites and on anything connected with these missiles. Third is doing both of those things and also at the same time launching a blockade, which requires, really, the third and which is a larger step. And then, as I take it, the fourth question is the degree of consultation. I don't know how much use consulting with the British... I expect they'll just object. Just have to decide to do it. Probably ought to tell them, though, the night before.

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<sup>296</sup> Sheldon Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory*, p. 2.

ROBERT KENNEDY: Mr. President?

PRESIDENT KENNEDY: Yes?

ROBERT KENNEDY: We have the fifth one, really, which is the invasion. I would say that you're dropping bombs all over Cuba if you do the second, air and the airport, knocking out their planes, dropping it on all their missiles. You're covering most of Cuba. You're going to kill an awful lot of people, and we're going to take an awful lot of heat on it. And then-- you know the heat. Because you're going to announce the reason that you're doing it is because they're sending in these kind of missiles. Well, I would think it's almost incumbent upon the Russians then, to say, "Well, we're going to send them in again. And if you do it again, we're going to do the same thing to Turkey. And we're going to do the same thing to Iran."<sup>297</sup>

With that interjection, RFK focused the president and the other ExComm members on the question of invasion. After that a series of exchanges among the president, Taylor, McNamara, Rusk and RFK revolved around the minimum time needed to invade Cuba after airstrikes. McNamara said a U.S. invasion force could land in Cuba seven days after airstrikes. RFK pressed him and the president to do it in five. RFK said: "If you could get in, get it started so that there wasn't any turning

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<sup>297</sup> Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy*, vol. II, p. 416.

back...”<sup>298</sup> The ExComm members continued to debate the situation, eventually veering from considerations of outright invasion to questions of the readiness of the Soviet missiles in Cuba and other related matters. Three central questions dominated the crisis talks that unfolded in the days that followed. What exactly were the Soviets and the Cubans planning to do with the missiles? How threatening in fact were the missiles? And what should the administration do to respond? The answers shifted over time for most ExComm members as the crisis intensified before eventually heading toward resolution. But RFK’s views as reflected in the transcripts of the ExComm deliberations remained largely static, rooted in a willingness to use direct U.S. military intervention despite obvious risks of escalation.

As the initial crisis talks stretched into the evening of October 16 the president edged toward approving airstrikes but remained openly wary of a ground invasion. RFK pressed the case nonetheless: “Hell if it’s war that’s gonna come on this thing, he [Khrushchev] sticks those kinds of missiles in after the warning, then he’s gonna get into a war over six months from now, or a year from now on something.”<sup>299</sup> In the same ExComm session RFK once again raised the idea of staging a fake attack on the base at Guantanamo to give the administration cause for a military takeover of the island. “You know, sink the *Maine* again or something,” RFK said.<sup>300</sup> During further ExComm discussions October 18 RFK argued against a naval blockade, the option the president increasingly favored. RFK said:

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<sup>298</sup> Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy*, vol. II, p. 418.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 450.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 452.

The argument against the blockade is that it's a very slow death. And it builds up, and it goes over a period of months, and during that period of time you've got all these people yelling and screaming about it, you've got examination of Russian ships and the shooting down the Russian planes that try to land there. You have to do all those things.<sup>301</sup>

As the ExComm meetings progressed RFK softened his stance somewhat. He evidently began to fully appreciate the real risk of an all-out nuclear exchange, perhaps through private conversations with the president. And the attorney general grew increasingly uneasy with the idea of a sneak attack, comparing such a move to Pearl Harbor. Still, RFK never fully abandoned the idea of an invasion as a course of action and remained skeptical of the blockade, openly disagreeing with the president even after JFK made his final decision on the matter October 19. That day RFK voiced his displeasure with the decision in a meeting at the State Department. The attorney general said: "It would be better for our children and grandchildren if we decided to face the Soviet threat, stand up to it and eliminate it, now. The circumstances for doing so at some future time were bound to be more unfavorable, the risks would be greater, the chances of success less good."<sup>302</sup> President Kennedy

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<sup>301</sup> Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy*, vol. II, p. 534.

<sup>302</sup> Sheldon Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory*, p. 45.

announced the blockade October 22. Late in the evening of October 23 RFK went personally to the Soviet embassy and met with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. Once alone in the ambassador's office RFK exploded in rage. He berated Dobrynin about Soviet deception and what he regarded as a breach of trust in the carefully cultivated communications between the White House and Kremlin. Dobrynin had little to say, and RFK left grimly stressing that the administration intended to enforce the blockade.<sup>303</sup>

Meanwhile, covert operations authorized by RFK and the Mongoose team before the crisis began were moving forward. The CIA kept plans for the raids in motion even as the crisis developed in the absence of an order by the Special Group (Augmented) leadership to halt operations. And, with a U.S. military attack on Cuba appearing somewhat likely, Harvey figured having commandos on the island would be useful for pre-invasion intelligence.<sup>304</sup> So on October 26, with tensions mounting by the hour, the CIA launched three commando infiltration teams of about five men each in small boats toward Cuba for fresh sabotage operations. Two such teams had already previously landed on the island, and six others were readying to go the next day via Navy submarines. Another 10 squads were set to go the same way soon after. Meanwhile, the CIA had slipped operatives onto a number of Cuban vessels with orders to cripple them either in port or at sea.<sup>305</sup> RFK and the Mongoose team gathered together to discuss whether the raids should go forward and quickly decided

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<sup>303</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, p.252-253.

<sup>304</sup> Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, pp. 234-235.

<sup>305</sup> Operation Mongoose memo, "Main Points to Consider," Oct. 26, 1962, Box 211, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

to recall the commandos to avert further inflaming the situation. All other infiltration and sabotage missions would be on hold as well. McNamara said that, for the time being, any Mongoose activities should be aimed at either getting the missiles out of Cuba or preparing for a U.S. invasion. That meant the Cuba project should undertake no effort to stoke a general uprising against Castro with the missiles present, a course of action the Mongoose team considered even as the president struggled to find a solution short of war.<sup>306</sup> The Mongoose team managed to avoid having its activities complicate the crisis, but RFK remained furious about the CIA's lack of human intelligence about the missiles. At one point RFK erupted in anger during the day's meetings, focusing his rage on Harvey. The berating was so severe that McCone decided immediately afterward that it would be best if Harvey left Washington for a while.<sup>307</sup> Soon he was gone from the Cuba project altogether.

Like the president, RFK had early on realized that U.S. missiles in Turkey would likely have to be bargained away in order to resolve the crisis peacefully, even though at bottom he loathed the idea. Any such arrangement would have to be kept secret, RFK felt.<sup>308</sup> The attorney general floated the idea of a swap discreetly with Bolshakov immediately after the president's quarantine speech, dispatching trusted journalist friends Charlie Bartlett and Frank Holeman to air the proposal through his Kremlin backchannel.<sup>309</sup> Then on October 27, after Soviet fire downed a U-2 and

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<sup>306</sup> Meeting minutes of the Special Group Augmented on Operation Mongoose, Oct. 26, 1962, Box 211, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>307</sup> Memo from FBI liaison to CIA on high-level meeting, Oct. 30, 1962, JFK Assassination Records, FBI Files, NARA Record No. 124-90092-10010.

<sup>308</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, p. 237.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 249-252.

killed the pilot, RFK urgently requested another meeting with Dobrynin, who quickly appeared in the attorney general's office. RFK warned Dobrynin that controlling escalation was becoming increasingly difficult. In addition to the U-2 incident Soviet fire had struck another low-level U.S. reconnaissance plane. A solution had to be found before things got out of hand. Adhering to orders, RFK opened an offer to Dobrynin by saying the president was ready to end the blockade and issue a public pledge not to invade Cuba if the Soviets withdrew their missiles, in effect embracing an initial offer Khrushchev sent privately to the White House. Dobrynin pressed the attorney general about the U.S. missiles in Turkey, in step with the Kremlin's subsequent public demands. RFK assured the ambassador that those could be removed, quietly, in four to five months. RFK said that removal of the missiles in Turkey could not publically be part of the deal given opposition to such a move within NATO.<sup>310</sup> Also RFK stressed that public knowledge of missiles in Turkey becoming part of the arrangement would hurt his own political career.<sup>311</sup> Thus the immediate crisis began to ease. What relief RFK felt was fleeting. In the end the entire episode only deepened his resolve to topple Castro.

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<sup>310</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, pp. 281-283.

<sup>311</sup> Telegram from Soviet Ambassador to the US Dobrynin to the USSR Foreign Ministry, Oct. 30, 1962, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of Foreign Policy, Russian Federation (AVP RF), Moscow; copy obtained by NHK (Japanese Television), provided to CWIHP, and on file at the National Security Archive, Washington, D.C.; translation by John Henriksen, Harvard University.

## **VI. Escalations in Vietnam and Cuba**

### **The Coming of a Coup in Saigon**

Vietnam and Cuba dominated the national security agenda for the Kennedy administration in its final year, and RFK thrust himself to the center of debate on both issues at the White House. The missile crisis had given virtually everyone in the administration reason for pause and seemingly presented a choice going forward in the Cold War. The United States could continue to press ahead in its confrontation with Moscow, tangling with communist forces in various corners of the world. Or, Washington could adopt a measure of restraint and seek paths of de-escalation and accommodation. These conflicting impulses tugged at the president and others in the administration as they contemplated Cuba and Vietnam, countries that in the eyes of the White House needed immediate U.S. attention in 1963. RFK remained hawkish on intervention in both countries. On Cuba, RFK simply wanted Castro gone, perhaps more than ever, and the attorney general was willing to undertake extreme measures toward that end. On Vietnam, RFK stayed supportive of U.S. intervention on the whole, never fundamentally questioning the U.S. military effort as it steadily escalated. However, RFK grew to have conflicting views about the course of the U.S. mission, as did a number of other administration officials. RFK and others were unsure whether or not Diem was part of the solution in South Vietnam or part of the problem.

RFK's episodic dealings on Laos plus his work on the counterinsurgency committee kept him involved generally in discussions of the situation in Southeast Asia. The Special Group CI reviewed weekly progress reports on Vietnam at each meeting in fact. The group considered itself responsible for crafting policy actions aimed at enhancing counterinsurgency operations in the country. They brainstormed ways to improve the military command structure, enhance interrogation of prisoners, strengthen the border and improve the security of South Vietnam.<sup>312</sup> The group's deliberations never had any meaningful impact on Vietnam policy, however. RFK's involvement in the Special Group CI nonetheless allowed him to join the policy debate on Vietnam during a critical time late in President Kennedy's tenure. He could claim policy expertise as well as the president's confidence, and he made his voice heard as talk of what to do in Vietnam consumed the national security team.

In September of 1962, just before administration absorbed itself for months with Cuba, RFK received a lengthy status report on Southeast Asia by the State Department. Vietnam presented worrisome signs then. Insurgent attacks averaged more than a hundred a week throughout 1962, despite months of efforts by Diem's government to enact the counterinsurgency strategy the administration advocated. The body count in the report's tally offered a foreboding sense of what was to come. Some 387 Vietcong fighters died waging war that year, according to the report RFK

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<sup>312</sup> Memorandum for the President, March 22, 1962, Box 210, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

received, while Diem's forces lost about 88.<sup>313</sup> However, *The New York Times* reported in October that North Vietnamese losses passed 5,000. South Vietnamese casualties, meanwhile, reportedly numbered more than 2,000.<sup>314</sup> Regardless of which figures were more accurate, the overall trend in the fighting was the same and cause for concern. South Vietnamese forces were supposedly inflicting casualties at a rate about three times higher than the insurgents, and yet the Vietcong appeared only to be getting stronger. The report RFK got in September was similar to many others that increasingly filled RFK's files in the latter part of 1962 and the early months of 1963.<sup>315</sup> Even amid all the troubles in Cuba, Vietnam was becoming a bigger and bigger strategic problem and political issue and thus increasingly drawing the attention of the attorney general.

The overarching political picture in Vietnam was worsening dramatically by the summer of 1963 as the security situation deteriorated at the same time. Diem had long stood accused of oppression by the Buddhist majority of Vietnam, and in May tensions erupted into violence. The Vietnamese city of Hue became a flashpoint. Hundreds of Buddhists gathered there May 8 to mark the 2,527<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Buddha. Diem's local enforcers banned the flying of traditional Buddhist flags. When the Buddhists staged street demonstrations in protest, Diem's security forces opened fire, killing nearly a dozen people, including women and children. In the days

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<sup>313</sup> Status Report on Southeast Asia, Department of State, Sept. 19, 1962, Box 211, Attorney General papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>314</sup> David Halberstam, *New York Times*, Oct. 11, 1962.

<sup>315</sup> See Box 192, Attorney General Papers, Classified File, John F. Kennedy Library. Many of the documents related to Vietnam in this box remain classified, but the withdrawal slips in effect offer an index of the paper flow as it built in RFK's files during this period.

and weeks that followed, Buddhists undertook a nationwide campaign against Diem, staging rallies and hunger strikes and issuing foreign appeals. Diem's government appeared largely unconcerned about the movement through June 11, when a Buddhist monk named Thich Quang Duc set himself ablaze in public. Pictures of the grisly suicide went around the world, and a set of them landed on President Kennedy's desk in the Oval Office.<sup>316</sup> Now there was open talk at the White House of whether Diem could or should remain in power. At first RFK felt Diem should go. In an oral history interview in 1964, when RFK still believed the war could be won, he said:

Diem – wouldn't make even the slightest concessions. He was difficult to reason with. And then it was built up tremendously in an adverse fashion here in the United States, and that was played back in Vietnam. I think the people themselves became concerned about it. The situation began to deteriorate in the spring of 1963... Our problem was that the important thing was to try to get somebody who could replace [Diem], somebody who could continue the war and keep the country united. And that was far more difficult. That was of great concern to all of us during this period of time. Nobody liked Diem, particularly. But how to get rid of him and get somebody who would

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<sup>316</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow*, p. 149.

continue the war, not split the country in two and, therefore, lose not only the war but the country: That was the great problem.<sup>317</sup>

In Saigon, meanwhile, South Vietnamese soldiers were plotting to overthrow Diem by the summer of 1963. Longtime CIA operative Lucien Conein had first learned of an emerging coup plot against Diem on July 4, when he met in Saigon with senior Vietnamese military figures who revealed that they were forming a plan.<sup>318</sup> In the weeks that followed, coup plotting intensified. At the same time ongoing efforts by the U.S. embassy team to persuade Diem to take political actions that could allay some of the popular anger foundered. Diem refused to remove his brother Nhu, the public face of the regime's crackdown against Buddhist protestors. Any gesture short of that would have likely done little to quell rising unrest. But Diem offered no sign of willingness to ease Nhu aside as of late August.

A new U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, arrived in Saigon August 22. Demonstrations in Saigon against Diem were drawing increasingly more people, and the South Vietnamese government was filling jails with arrested protestors. Neither Lodge nor senior officials at the State Department in Washington could see a way forward for Diem given the increasing pace of political deterioration, and a change in U.S. policy was sought,

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<sup>317</sup> Robert Kennedy, *Robert Kennedy in His Own Words*, Edwin Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, eds., p. 396.

<sup>318</sup> Lucien Conein, recorded interview by WGBH, May 7, 1981, WGBH Media Library & Archives. Accessed online Nov. 6, 2011: <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/vietnam-3abc7d-interview-with-lucien-conein-1981>

immediately. An August 24 cable that went from Washington to Saigon was effectively a throwing down of the gauntlet by a faction of the State Department who came to feel that Diem's government was on a suicidal trajectory despite all the U.S. backing over the years. Egregious acts of government violence traceable directly to Nhu through that summer left Washington with little choice but to demand Nhu's immediate removal, the cable said. If Diem would not rid himself of Nhu, then Diem himself would have to go. Drafted chiefly by Roger Hilsman in Washington on a Saturday, the cable went to President Kennedy, who approved it for release from his home in Hyannis Port.<sup>319</sup>

The cable was the source of heated arguments among top Kennedy administration advisers in the following days, including RFK. The document seemed to mark a major policy shift whereby Diem would no longer enjoy U.S. support yet left unclear what the U.S. country team in Saigon should do about the obvious question of who could replace Diem. Also, the cable had undergone an unorthodox approval process since it arose on a weekend when Rusk, McNamara and McCone were away from Washington in addition to the president. In an interview RFK recalled the deliberations surrounding the cable:

The president was up at the Cape and they gave him a telegram. He thought it had been approved by McNamara and Maxwell Taylor and everybody else. It had not. It went out on a Monday. I

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<sup>319</sup> Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, pp. 487-490.

became much more intimately involved in it then, because I saw the telegram and raised a question about what direction they were going to go: Who was going to take over, and who was going to run the coup, and how many soldiers they had on either side. We had a meeting on Wednesday, I think, and all these questions were put on the table, mostly by McNamara. Nobody had the answers to them. The fact that Maxwell Taylor and McNamara and John McCone hadn't been brought in on this created a great fuss. The government split in two. It was the only time, really, in three years that the government was broken in two in a very disturbing way.<sup>320</sup>

On August 29, the White House sent another cable to Saigon seeking to clarify the administration's policy for Lodge and the South Vietnam country team. With normal approval procedures in place, President Kennedy signed off on new policy guidance, which was not fundamentally different from the policy outlined in the August 24 cable. It said in essence that the White House would indeed welcome a coup if it had good odds of succeeding. The U.S. mission in Saigon should not be involved in planning such a coup but should stay abreast of

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<sup>320</sup> Robert Kennedy, *Robert Kennedy in His Own Words*, Edwin Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, eds., pp. 396-397.

moves by the generals, who should be informed that the United States would provide no material support to them in their effort against Diem.<sup>321</sup>

The policy clarification sent to Saigon did little to quiet arguments in Washington about what to do, however. Disagreements among senior officials about what the policy was and what it should be continued. Some in the Kennedy administration believed that Diem could be brought around, despite increasing signs that he had grown unresponsive to U.S. coaxing and cajoling. Others were eager to see Diem fall, a prospect that seemed increasingly close since coup plotting had continued apace among the Vietnamese generals. On September 6, RFK joined a discussion about Vietnam at the White House attended by Bundy, Taylor, Rusk, Helms and McNamara, among others. Talk ranged from Diem's standing at the United Nations to ground developments from South Vietnam. RFK, however, seized on what was then the central issue, pressing it with the group. Could the United States win in Vietnam with Diem or not? The attorney general asked this of the group multiple times. If the answer was yes, RFK reasoned, then the administration needed to become much tougher with Diem in order to get some new results. If the answer was no, RFK said, then it was time to face that reality. None of the other men offered an answer to RFK. They talked of getting further assessments.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, Part V. B. 4., p. 538.

<sup>322</sup> Memorandum of Conference with the President, Sept. 6, 1963, FRUS, Vol. IV, doc. 66. The president only joined the tail end of this meeting. Mostly RFK and the others debated among themselves.

Several days later, during another Vietnam meeting held at the State Department, RFK expressed impatience with all the waffling from the president's most senior advisors. It was clear that prospects for success would improve without Nhu and Diem, RFK said. The question was how steep the price for a change would be. The time for discussing generalities about the situation and airing differences of views was over, the attorney general argued. As far as RFK was concerned the time had come to discuss specific actions based on the conclusion that Diem and Nhu should go.<sup>323</sup> RFK tried to push the rest of the White House advisors to action, sensing a rough consensus forming around the idea of ousting Diem. He exerted what influence he held but failed to steer the thinking or decisions. The group remained divided about what to do, however. Debate continued, and the general policy drift RFK clearly hoped to halt nonetheless persisted.

Meanwhile, the coup plotters in Saigon, led by General Duong Van Minh, a.k.a. Big Minh, evidently sensed the lingering division and indecisiveness among officials in Washington and the U.S. mission in Saigon. Big Minh wanted clarity regarding the U.S. position as the coup plot was moving into its final phases. So on October 5, Conein met with Minh, at the general's request. Minh asked flatly whether the United States would move to stop the developing coup. Minh stressed that the coup did not need U.S. support, just U.S. acquiescence and willingness to continue backing a new government once it came to power. In line with guidance from Washington, Conein told Minh that he could not at that time offer assurances

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<sup>323</sup> Minutes of State Department meeting on Vietnam, Sept. 10, 1963, DSNA Item No. VI00969.

that the United States would remain idle in the face of a coup. Minh urged Conein to seek clarification on the U.S. position and said he would be in touch to get further word. In this same conversation Minh revealed that the coup plot was fairly well developed and indicated a willingness to leave Diem in power so long as Nhu and another reviled brother, Ngo Dinh Can, were eliminated.<sup>324</sup>

Conein passed Minh's message to Washington. On October 6, the U.S. embassy in Saigon received a cable from Washington saying the matter had been discussed with President Kennedy. JFK did not want the coup plotters to be under the impression that the United States would stand in their way or refuse to support a new regime once in power so long as the new government committed itself to carrying out the war effectively. But the White House wanted to know more about the plot and urged the embassy to have Conein press Minh for details, saying assurances were needed from the generals in order for Washington to render an official decision.<sup>325</sup>

It was a difficult, perhaps impossible, balancing act for Conein. Basically the White House wanted Conein to get more information about the coup from Minh without revealing that Washington was in support of a coup. Yet at the same time Conein should let on that the United States was not going to stand in the way. Conein remembers getting at least the latter point across to Minh in late September or early October.<sup>326</sup> The carefully nuanced proviso stemming from lack of consensus among Kennedy administration policymakers was clearly lost on Minh. Thus, by default,

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<sup>324</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, Part V. B. 4., p. 575.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 577.

<sup>326</sup> Lucien Conein, recorded interview by WGBH, May 7, 1981, WGBH Media Library & Archives. Accessed online Nov. 6, 2011: <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/vietnam-3abc7d-interview-with-lucien-conein-1981>.

the White House had settled on a policy of regime change as far as Big Minh and the generals were concerned, and they went ahead with their plans accordingly.

The coup's odds of success were foremost on President Kennedy's mind on October 29, when senior officials from the CIA and the Pentagon gathered at the White House. The meeting began at 4:20 p.m. Those attending included Vice President Johnson, McNamara, Rusk, RFK, McCone, Helms, Taylor, Bundy, CIA Far East Division Chief William Colby and a few other aides. The president wanted to know how many forces would come to Diem's aid in the event of a coup. President Kennedy feared that the coup might fail in its early stages, with Diem uncovering the plot against him in a way that exposed American involvement. The president also worried that the coup might lead to a prolonged crisis in Saigon. Unless the rebels were especially swift, Diem would have time to entrench himself and summon loyalists to strike his attackers, leading to fighting in Saigon. This had occurred in 1960, when Diem fought off a previous coup attempt. Kennedy did not want a repeat. Colby, who opened the meeting with a briefing on the situation, could offer no assurances to Kennedy that the coup would be quick enough to avoid an outbreak of fighting in Saigon. The prevailing CIA analysis was that Diem had about 9,000 loyalists in the Vietnamese security forces, with roughly the same number ready to side with the would-be junta in a coup. Colby concluded his briefing this way: "There's enough, in other words, to have a good fight. On both sides." Kennedy

chuckled, saying, “Thank you for your decisive...” Others in the room laughed as well before launching into a disorganized discussion about the coming coup.<sup>327</sup>

The recording JFK secretly made of the session reveals loud debate swerving in several different directions from there, with multiple people speaking over each other making related yet divergent points. Bundy suggested putting Colby’s analysis to the team in Saigon so that they could either concur or dissent based on their own assessment. RFK noted that Diem probably had gotten wind of a coup and suggested that Diem may have infiltrated coup plots with his own operatives. Rusk raised the prospect of civil war erupting if the coup spiraled out of control and said the coup plotters should be warned that any move against Diem must involve very quick success. The discussion then meandered a bit before turning to what should be said in the next cables from Washington to Saigon.

RFK suddenly interrupted with a comment that in essence crystallized the central issue, which had gotten lost amid the various distractions. The attorney general asked simply whether the United States should be pursuing Diem’s overthrow at all. A key exchange in the transcript involving Robert Kennedy, Rusk, Taylor, McCone and the president highlighted the attorney general’s thinking. RFK, in a reversal of his earlier opinions on the issue, argued against overthrowing Diem given the uncertainties surrounding such a move. At first blush, RFK’s change of heart might seem to flow from a waxing sense of doubt about the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. But close inspection of the logic RFK articulated reveals that his reversal is

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<sup>327</sup> John Prados, ed., *The White House Tapes*, p. 98.

rooted in hawkishness. During the Kennedy administration RFK never questioned the U.S. mission in Vietnam. He only ever sought to ensure its success. For this reason he voiced doubt about the unfolding coup:

ROBERT KENNEDY: I may be a minority, but I just don't see that this makes any sense on the face of it. I mean, it's different from a coup in the Iraq or [a] South American country. We are so intimately involved in this... We're putting the whole future of the country and, really, Southeast Asia, in the hands of somebody that we don't know very well... Maybe it's gonna be successful, but I don't think there's anybody, any reports that I've seen, [indicating] that anybody has a plan to show where this is going...

TAYLOR: I must say that I agree with the attorney general at present... I would be willing to step farther... first because you'll have a completely inexperienced government, and secondly because the provincial chiefs, who are so essential to the conduct of the field, will all be changed, and it's taken us over a year now to develop any truly effective work in that area... In the long terms, it might be good. In the short terms, then it's bad.

MCCONE: I think our opinion is somewhat the same as General Taylor expressed... A successful coup, in our opinion—I feel very definitely that’s right—would create a period of political confusion, interregnum, and would seriously affect the war for a period of time which is not possible to estimate. It might be disastrous.

President Kennedy then spoke up again to say that the parity of loyalists versus rebels in Saigon meant that a coup should not be pursued unless the embassy team could offer some information showing that the balance of forces would tilt toward the junta once the coup began. McNamara reminded everyone that the clock was quickly running out. “If these people are correct as to when this thing is going to happen, we are now at 5 o’clock on the morning of the 30<sup>th</sup> out there, and it’s gonna happen in maybe 24 to 36 hours.”<sup>328</sup> McNamara was right. The mutinous generals in Saigon made their move on November 1, with the White House still divided about whether a coup should happen at all. President Kennedy never had a chance to embrace RFK’s advice or reject it. Events in Saigon overtook the president. By November 2 the coup plotters were firmly in control, and Diem and Nhu were dead, executed in the back of an armored personnel carrier shortly after being captured by the junta. The CIA sent the attorney general an intelligence brief on the status of the

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<sup>328</sup> John Prados, *Safe for Democracy*, p. 117.

coup November 1, when all appeared successful. The military had seized power smoothly by all accounts.<sup>329</sup> This would soon prove to be a delusion.

### **A Final Push against Castro**

None of the doubts about overthrowing Diem applied to Castro at any point, and the Kennedys pursued the Cuban leader's downfall without pause. President Kennedy never considered covert operations off the table in light of the missile agreement and said so explicitly to RFK and the other ExComm men once the most intense moment of the crisis had passed. We can't give the impression that Castro is home free, JFK said.<sup>330</sup> Within days of the crisis ending RFK assessed what CIA assets were available for use in pressing ahead with covert actions in Cuba. McCone informed the attorney general that 20 trained Cuban commando were ready for infiltration operations, with more such teams to become available in the months ahead.<sup>331</sup> And by December the CIA had renewed resupply missions for operatives inside Cuba in order to sustain what assets remained for any future operations.<sup>332</sup> The Kennedys clearly expressed their intention to resume covert operations against Cuba regardless of other ongoing diplomacy.

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<sup>329</sup> CIA memorandum, the Coup in South Vietnam, Box 250, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>330</sup> Summary Record of the 24<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, Nov. 12, 1962, FRUS V. XI, 170.

<sup>331</sup> Memorandum from McCone to the Attorney General et alia, Oct. 30, 1962, FRUS V.XI, 1961-1963, 462.

<sup>332</sup> Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence, Operation Mongoose Support of Assets Inside Cuba, Dec. 7, 1962, Box 319, Presidential Papers, National Security Files, John F. Kennedy Library.

Whatever urge for revenge RFK felt at the beginning of the crisis gave way to straightforward strategic thinking about Cuba in the period immediately afterward. Cuba, in RFK's mind, still posed a major security threat, and the attorney general remained unquestionably the administration's chief official handling the issue. RFK feared that the Soviets might try to get more missiles in even while they vowed to remove them. He worried about other conventional arms coming to Cuba and possibly being exported to another Latin American country.<sup>333</sup> The administration grew increasingly concerned over reports about Soviet missiles supposedly being hidden in caves and construction of a Soviet submarine base.<sup>334</sup> Meanwhile, public anxiety about weapons of all kinds in Cuba ran high, in part because Cuban exiles, still hoping for U.S. military action, spoke to the press about alleged military buildups on the island. The picture they painted may or may not have been exaggerated. Regardless it caused a further political problem RFK began to address.<sup>335</sup> A lingering sense of menace emanating from Cuba would pose problems for the upcoming election season.

On November 5, 1962, Dobrynin appeared in the attorney general's office with another letter from Khrushchev. The Soviet premier was unhappy that the White House was pressing for the removal of Soviet IL-28 bombers from Cuba, in addition to the missiles. RFK told Dobrynin that the bombers, like the missiles, were

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<sup>333</sup> Summary Record of the 24<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, Nov. 12, 1962, FRUS V. XI, 170.

<sup>334</sup> Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting No. 18, Nov. 3, 1962, DSNA No. CC01950.

<sup>335</sup> Summary Record of the 24<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, Nov. 12, 1962, FRUS V. XI, 170.

considered offensive weapons and had to go. The Kremlin did not think that was part of the deal. Moscow held to the view that the agreement involved removal of Soviet missiles in exchange for an end to the blockade and U.S. surveillance flights over Cuba. The exchanges between President Kennedy and Khrushchev that formed the basis of the deal in October, after all, made no mention of the bombers.<sup>336</sup> As the two talked the president called. Word had come, JFK said, that U.S. reconnaissance aircraft over Cuba had taken fire. The attorney general in closing with Dobrynin stressed that any arrangements, whatever they involved, were dependent upon no incidents in the skies over Cuba.<sup>337</sup> For a moment it seemed like as though the entire deal was in jeopardy, with another standoff looming.

Gradually, tensions that filled the air in the aftermath of the crisis faded. The Kremlin relented on the bombers. Castro, while generally hostile to the dealings between Moscow and Washington over his country, nonetheless helped the situation by finally releasing the remaining prisoners still held from the Bay of Pigs in December, allowing them to be free for Christmas. Upon release, members of the 2506 Brigade underwent extensive interrogation by U.S. officials in Miami. RFK requested a report on the questioning and got a lengthy reply from the Army, which handled the screening. On the whole the prisoners expressed relief at being free and

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<sup>336</sup> Telegram from the Soviet Ambassador to the USA A.F. Dobrynin to USSR Foreign Ministry, November 14, 1962, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVP RF; copy obtained by NHK, provided to CWIHP, and on file at the National Security Archive; translation by John Henriksen.

<sup>337</sup> Memorandum from the attorney general to President Kennedy, Nov. 5, 1962, FRUS V. XI, 1961-1963, 144.

an eagerness to continue in efforts to bring down Castro.<sup>338</sup> Castro, however, began looking for a way out of seemingly endless hostilities with Washington.

In the opening months of 1963 Castro signaled a desire for rapprochement with the administration, as the CIA noted in a report sent to RFK and other senior officials. Castro himself along with multiple senior officials in his government repeatedly telegraphed a desire for a thaw in relations between Havana and Washington. The message from Havana to the Kennedy administration was subtle but clear, aired through prominent media interviews and midlevel diplomatic conversations known by all parties involved to be fodder for intelligence reports. The offer, in essence, said that Castro was willing to talk about improving relations if the White House made the first move.<sup>339</sup> Castro himself stated this explicitly during a lengthy interview in April with ABC correspondent Lisa Howard, who briefed the CIA upon returning to the United States. Castro could not have been clearer about his desire for an easing of tensions. He and Howard even went so far as to discuss who the proper intermediary might be and how the talks should unfold if there was willingness on the part of the Kennedy administration. Helms made sure RFK was aware of Castro's desire.<sup>340</sup> Castro's peace feelers failed to impress the attorney general, who said any rapprochement should only come if Castro undertook some

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<sup>338</sup> Interrogation of Member of the 2506 Brigade, Jan. 26, 1963, JFK Assassination Records, Army Files, Califano Papers, NARA Record No. 198-0004-10039.

<sup>339</sup> Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence et alia, Reported Desire of the Cuban Government for Rapprochement with the United States, June 5, 1963, Attorney General Papers, Box 209, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library. Document declassified per author's appeal.

<sup>340</sup> Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence, Interview with U.S. Newswoman with Fidel Castro Indicating Possible Interest in Rapprochement with the United States, May 1, 1963, Box 209, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

fundamental steps such as removing Soviet troops from Cuba and ending subversion activities in Latin America.<sup>341</sup> As far as RFK was concerned Castro still had to go. The only question was how.

Enthusiasm for another round of operations against Castro reached a low point in January of 1963. Lansdale and Harvey fell out of the picture, effectively fired from the White House Cuba team after RFK made his displeasure with both abundantly clear.<sup>342</sup> Bundy, in a memo to the president, said there was virtually “universal agreement that Mongoose is at a dead end.” The president himself tacitly agreed in calling for a fresh approach to Cuba policy, ordering his advisors to come up with a plan for a new arrangement going forward.<sup>343</sup> The president and his advisors ultimately had the State Department create a new position for coordinating all Cuban affairs, including covert operations.<sup>344</sup> The arrangement was more cosmetic than substantive and ultimately changed virtually nothing about how Cuba was handled at the White House, however. In practice RFK and the other senior White House officials who had worked on Mongoose still held authority to conceive and launch covert actions in Cuba and direct overall policy as members of the Special Group, the National Security Council, ExComm and the Standing Group, the successor board to ExComm. RFK still figured prominently in all policy discussions about Cuba, wherever they occurred. No bureaucratic flow or arrangement of

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<sup>341</sup> Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Special Group, Nov. 5, 1963, FRUS V.XI, 1961-1963, 373.

<sup>342</sup> Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, p. 235.

<sup>343</sup> Memorandum for the president from Bundy, Further organization of the Government for dealing with Cuba, Jan. 4, 1963, DNSA No. CC02824.

<sup>344</sup> National Security Action Memorandum No. 213, Jan. 8, 1963, Box 231, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

committees had any real effect on RFK's central role in Cuba policy while President Kennedy remained in office.

By the spring of 1963 a new status quo on Cuba had taken shape. Publically President Kennedy offered assurances that no offensive weapons remained on the island even while remaining worried and uncertain privately. The Soviet troop presence still in Cuba, the president said, posed no immediate threat to the United States. But, since Castro would not allow inspections of the island, U.S. aerial surveillance would continue to keep a close watch.<sup>345</sup> U.S. insistence on surveillance flights brought protests from both Havana and Moscow, as did the increasing hit-and-run attacks staged by militant Cuban exiles. Proliferating militant exile groups operating loosely under the banner of the Cuban Revolutionary Council had grown more capable and audacious in their periodic strikes against the Castro regime by early 1963. By March senior Cuban officials had renewed public complaints and condemnations of U.S. subversion activities to the United Nations.<sup>346</sup> In fact, during the months immediately following the missile crisis, the administration had largely refrained from sabotage operations in Cuba.<sup>347</sup> But exile outfits acting on their own, sometimes with support or encouragement from the CIA, kept up raids.

Throughout 1963 the CIA tried to keep tabs on the exile raids, which took place more and more as the increasingly splintered community grew restless and despairing. The agency sometimes offered help for raids they deemed worthwhile.

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<sup>345</sup> President Kennedy news conference, Feb. 7, 1963, DSNA No. CC02916.

<sup>346</sup> Protest of New Aggressive Actions Allegedly Taken by the United States against Cuba, United Nations press release, March 4, 1963, DSNA No. CC02977.

<sup>347</sup> CIA memorandum of White House Cuba meeting, April 3, 1963, JFK Assassination Records, CIA Files, NARA Record No. 104-10310-10245.

Other times the CIA obstructed the exile attack plans, setting domestic law enforcement on groups hatching plots the CIA disliked for whatever reason. Frequently the attorney general was notified about these activities by the FBI, which under Hoover's watch kept a close eye on the CIA's dealings with Cuban exiles in the United States.<sup>348</sup> For its part, the FBI regarded RFK as the authority allowing or disallowing the activities of various exile groups, regardless of whether such groups received direct support from the CIA. Ostensibly all Cuban exile groups arming themselves and conducting raids against Cuba were in violation of U.S. neutrality laws. As a matter of course the FBI undertook efforts to uncover all such activity. If an exile group the FBI monitored appeared in violation of U.S. domestic law, the bureau contacted the CIA. If the CIA said the group's activities were part of a national security effort, then the FBI did not disrupt them. But the attorney general's prominent role in Cuba policy, combined with his domestic law enforcement authority, allowed him also to vouch for exile groups, as was the case with a militant Cuban exile outfit known as Alpha-66. That group engaged in number of actions not involving the CIA, but the attorney general instructed the FBI to leave them alone anyway.<sup>349</sup> What this amounted to in practice overall was clear enough to the FBI, the CIA and the Cuban exiles themselves: RFK personally held the power to bless or halt rebel attacks on Cuba. The attorney general's acquiescence toward exile activity,

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<sup>348</sup> Memorandum from Hoover to RFK concerning Pedro Luis Diaz Lanz and Neutrality Matters, July 18, 1963, JFK Assassination Records, FBI Files, NARA Record No. 124-10294-10111. This memo represents one example.

<sup>349</sup> FBI memorandum on anti-Castro activities in the United States, March 26, 1963, JFK Assassination Records, FBI Files, NARA Record No. 124-90107-10283.

then, was a green light and a signal all involved that the White House either condoned or actively supported Cuban rebel attacks.

RFK and the president might have continued this general encouragement of rebel activity if larger Cold War issues had not intruded. The exiles struck Soviet military assets in addition to Cuban targets, creating a serious dilemma for the administration's dealings with Moscow in 1963. On March 29, the president gathered the ExComm to discuss the exile raids. The question was whether the administration should actively try to stop them or urge the exiles to attack strictly Cuban targets and avoid tangling with Soviet forces. The group was divided about what to do. The raids were useful in terms of discrediting Castro, some felt, but they risked provoking the Soviets to increase their military support of the regime. For his part RFK acknowledged that keeping up the charade of noninvolvement with the exile raids was untenable. Everyone at the meeting felt that the raids would only increase in the months ahead. And as such international pressure would mount for the administration to do something to stop the attacks. Disavowing the attacks but simply allowing them to continue, RFK felt, was unworkable. If the policy was to stop the raids, the attorney general said, that could be done. The president leaned toward trying to coax the exiles into cooperating more with the CIA to ensure they were attacking only targets that the administration wanted hit. But if the exiles would not respond to guidance then they would have to be stopped, perhaps by prosecuting some for violation of U.S. laws. No firm decisions were taken at the meeting. The

president ordered RFK, McCone and some others to come up with a formal plan for dealing with the problem.<sup>350</sup>

A few days after that White House meeting Khrushchev passed a message to President Kennedy through RFK and Dobrynin, who hand delivered it to the attorney general at the Justice Department. The Soviet premier bitterly complained about raids in Cuba by exiles and placed blame squarely on the administration. Khrushchev also denounced the administration's efforts to ruin Cuba's economy. Furthermore, Khrushchev said, U.S. actions to pressure Moscow into withdrawing Soviet troops from Cuba would go nowhere. He vowed to keep anti-aircraft missile batteries in Cuba and threatened to shoot down reconnaissance planes. RFK was somewhat taken aback, regarding the message as uncharacteristically bellicose in comparison to the other missives he and Dobrynin had passed back and forth on behalf of their bosses. RFK said so to Dobrynin, who agreed. RFK told the Soviet ambassador that any further such messages should simply be passed through the State Department. Their informal channel, he implied was not a place for bluster and threats.<sup>351</sup> RFK evidently viewed the message as a rant by Khrushchev. In reality Khrushchev's anger reflected mounting tensions between Washington and Moscow, with Cuba as the main cause.

At a White House meeting within a day of Khrushchev's message the president and the attorney general together told Helms and others working on Cuba in

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<sup>350</sup> Summary Record of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, March 29, 1963, FRUS V. XI, 1961-1963, 303.

<sup>351</sup> Memorandum from the attorney general to President Kennedy, April 3, 1963, FRUS V. VI, Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges, 94.

no uncertain terms that they wanted new sabotage operations. The president expressed general approval for the ongoing raids by exiles done on their own volition so long as they did real damage on Cuban targets, avoided Soviet ships and did not feature showy press conferences by the saboteurs afterward. Regarding U.S. actions, the president ordered the CIA to come up with a plan for what might be accomplished with sabotage operations in the next six months. RFK suggested using attack teams as large as 100 to 500 men. Perhaps commando teams of such a size could infiltrate Cuba, the attorney general said, conduct attacks and then evacuate. The CIA regarded this as impossible, since Castro's forces would certainly destroy any such force that suddenly appeared in Cuba. But RFK's suggestion revealed how the Kennedys harbored ambitions for action in Cuba that went well beyond what the CIA or the Special Group contemplated as doable or wise.<sup>352</sup> Midlevel officials generally felt that sabotage operations undermined intelligence capabilities and had an overall negative impact on the political situation. Bundy and others stressed this to the president and the attorney general, but the Kennedys did not want to hear it.<sup>353</sup> As before they demanded action. RFK felt that something had to be done, even if it had no real hope of bringing Castro down.<sup>354</sup>

There were reasons for the Kennedys to pursue covert attacks on Cuba beyond blindly swinging at a foe the brothers clearly loathed. The CIA, in coming up with a

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<sup>352</sup> CIA memorandum of White House Cuba meeting, April 3, 1963, JFK Assassination Records, CIA Files, NARA Record No. 104-10310-10245.

<sup>353</sup> Memorandum for the Record, meeting on Cuba, April 3, 1963, DSNA No. CU01394. The Kennedys wishes for covert action come through clearly in this account of policy discussion, as do the doubts of midlevel officials involved in Cuba operations.

<sup>354</sup> Summary of Record of the 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting for the Standing Group of the National Security Council, May 28, 1963, FRUS V. XI, 1961-1963, 344.

covert action campaign as the president directed, emphasized the risk of allowing Castro to remain unchallenged. Castro would only be more difficult to remove in later years if allowed a free hand to consolidate his control of the island and perhaps widen his influence in Latin America. Regular attacks, staged dramatically to ensure public notice, undermined Castro's claim to authority and kept alive overthrow dreams among the exiles. The net effect, according to CIA analysis, would be a slight destabilization of Castro generally that would pave the way for regime change in the future when an opportune moment arose.<sup>355</sup> The attacks then essentially comprised on some level the middle phase of what the Kennedys saw as a long game. Keep Castro unsteady, the thinking went, and be prepared to knock him over at the right moment.

### **The Exiles and the Endgame**

Throughout 1963 RFK maintained his personal contacts with exile leaders, chiefly Artime and Cardona. Mostly RFK spoke in person with various Cuban exiles at his home or at the Justice Department, holding discreet meetings in the same way he did with Bolshakov and Dobrynin. RFK evinced a heartfelt sympathy for the brigade members especially. He wanted to see them treated fairly now that they were in the United States. Those who wanted to continue to take part in U.S. actions against Castro should be allowed to do so, he felt. Others who wanted to move on should be

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<sup>355</sup> Memorandum for the Standing Group of the National Security Council, Proposed Covert Policy and Integrated Program of Action towards Cuba, June 8, 1963, Box 232, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

supported.<sup>356</sup> RFK met with Cardona personally in early April at Hickory Hill, at the invitation of RFK. Dr. Ernesto Aragon, a senior figure in the CRC, also came, as did a senior officer from the CIA. The meeting was tense. Cardona told RFK that the exile community no longer had faith in the administration since it was clear the policy had changed. The Kennedys no longer seemed serious about overthrowing Castro, Cardona said to RFK. The attorney general tried to convince Cardona that he was wrong, that the White House remained intent on bringing Castro down. At the same time RFK complained about rogue exile raids, saying the administration had to take steps to curb them. He told Cardona to disclose any plans for future raids. Talk then turned to the possibility of a U.S. invasion of Cuba. As far as Cardona was concerned the president and the attorney general personally had assured him in April of 1962 that the exiles could count on a U.S. military invasion at some point. Prior to the missile crisis the CIA had sent further signals, according to Cardona, suggesting that an invasion plan was afoot. Yet nothing concrete ever materialized, leaving Cardona feeling deceived. RFK argued that no such promises were ever made. The two could not agree, and Cardona left Hickory Hill angry. In following days Cardona fumed about what he regarded as U.S. deception and abandonment, and in short order he announced his resignation as head of the CRC.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Summary Record of the 38<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, Jan. 25, 1963, FRUS V. XI, 1961-1963, 274.

<sup>357</sup> Memorandum for Bundy from Gordan Chase, Future of the Brigade 2506, Jan. 30, 1963, DSNA No. CU01378.

The organization effectively disbanded once Cardona walked away.<sup>358</sup> The already fragmented exile community lost its central figure. RFK was right in telling Cardona that U.S. policy had not changed. Indeed, the administration had consistently contemplated a military overthrow of Cuba, to be done at a time expedient for the administration, not the exiles. And yet Cardona and other exiles had clearly believed that the administration would work in concert with their cause, standing ready to move militarily when the moment presented itself. The exiles believed they would have a hand in making that moment. The president, the attorney general and the CIA fanned these beliefs through 1961 and 1962. Only in 1963 was it becoming clear to Cardona and others in the exile community that the administration held to its own agenda with regard to Cuba, and the exile community really had no say on matters. The Kennedys and the White House generally regarded the exiles as instruments of U.S. policy, to be used when needed and discarded when not. Cardona's falling out with the administration represented a harsh disillusionment long in the making for him and the exiles generally.

The collapse of the CRC coincided with a review of overall Cuba policy by RFK and others at the White House. The remnants of the Mongoose team tried to formulate a fresh strategy. No one seemed to have any new ideas. McNamara clearly had grown impatient with the situation. If the policy is to get rid of Castro, he asked during a key meeting, then there ought to be a plan to do so. At present there was

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<sup>358</sup> FBI memorandum on anti-Castro activities, Sept. 13, 1963, JFK Assassination Records, FBI Files, NARA Record No. 124-10287-10038.

none.<sup>359</sup> The CIA had continued its murderous plotting against Castro, coming up with assassination schemes that involved an exploding conch shell and a wetsuit dusted with poison. As ever it came to nothing.<sup>360</sup> RFK proposed three studies. One would outline measures the administration could take in the event of Castro's death or the downing of another U-2. Another study would look at the feasibility of overthrowing Castro within eighteen months. And a third study would examine ways to make as much trouble as possible within Cuba over the next eighteen months.<sup>361</sup> The studies RFK suggested were redundant, however. By early April the president and the attorney general were together pressing the CIA to step up covert action, a new campaign that would in effect form the center of U.S. policy toward Cuba.<sup>362</sup>

From RFK's perspective, the logic demanding action against Castro continually prevailed as the attorney general regularly assessed Latin America for signs of communist insurgency. RFK seemed to adopt the CIA's generally alarmist assessment of communist threats to the region. In August, the CIA aired a warning about pro-Castro guerrillas operating in Nicaragua. The fighters had entered Nicaragua from Honduras in July and had remained active, traveling by boat along river ways and buying supplies from locals in the rural areas. Meanwhile, in Costa Rica, backers of the Nicaraguan guerrillas were gathering arms and supplies for them,

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<sup>359</sup> Summary Record of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the Standing Group of the National Security Council, April 23, 1963, FRUS V. XI, 1961-1963, 322.

<sup>360</sup> Church Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, interim report, Nov. 20, 1975, pp. 85-88.

<sup>361</sup> Summary Record of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the Standing Group of the National Security Council, April 23, 1963, FRUS V. XI, 1961-1963, 322.

<sup>362</sup> CIA memorandum of White House Cuba meeting, April 3, 1963, JFK Assassination Records, CIA Files, NARA Record No. 104-10310-10245.

saying there was a plan to open a new revolutionary front on the Caribbean coast. RFK received a copy of the agency's intelligence report along with a map showing probable areas of guerrilla activity.<sup>363</sup> The CIA report was one of many similar such bulletins RFK got from the CIA, memos of two and three pages bulleted with items of interest from various Latin American countries.

Through these RFK was privy to intelligence snippets that often meant little on their own -- the supposed confession of an arrested rebel suspect in Bolivia, reports of guerrilla training camps springing up in remote jungles in Central America and the like.<sup>364</sup> The broader picture these reports drew, however, was a Latin America crawling with communist insurgents. Countries big and small in the region seemed threatened by Castro's revolutionaries as far as the Kennedys were concerned. President Kennedy personally pressed the CIA to give him hard figures on the number of Castro's subversives at work in Venezuela specifically and Latin America generally in concerns shared with RFK.<sup>365</sup> In response the agency assembled an intelligence estimate that put the number of subversives from various Latin American countries who had trained in Cuba recently as high as 1,500. And the

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<sup>363</sup> Current Intelligence Memorandum, Significant Developments in the Latin American Countries on the Counterinsurgency List, Aug. 13, 1963, Box 208, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library. Document declassified per author appeal.

<sup>364</sup> Intelligence Memorandum, Significant Developments in the Latin American Countries on the Counterinsurgency Critical List, Aug. 20, 1963, Box 210, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library. Document declassified per author appeal.

<sup>365</sup> Memorandum for the Acting Director of Central Intelligence, March 14, 1963, Box 242, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

guerrillas Castro embraced had been busy afterward, setting up further training camps of their own in Costa Rica, Honduras and Panama.<sup>366</sup>

In the eyes of the Kennedys, Castro stood at the center of a web of communist subversives that stretched across all of Latin America. The CIA considerably overstated the threat. Castro could offer training and inspiration to would-be communist revolutionaries in Latin America but little else. To be sure Castro yearned to see revolutions like the one he led flourish throughout the region, but the realities of Cuba's poverty and international isolation limited his ability to turn such visions into reality. Moreover, Khrushchev explicitly told Castro in May of 1963 that the Soviet Union would not support armed insurrection in Latin America and that Castro should abandon efforts to orchestrate communist movements in the region. The Kremlin had in the past made only small efforts at spreading communism in Latin America, and missile crisis lessened Moscow's already low appetite for such pursuits. Both Moscow and Havana kept up the rhetoric of communist revolution during 1963 but in practice backed away from the cause.<sup>367</sup> RFK and the Kennedy administration nonetheless allowed themselves to believe the direst warnings about the threat Castro posed. For RFK, the same logic that drove him to see instability in the Dominican Republic as a mortal threat to regional security evidently kept him worried about Castro and the small bands of guerrilla fighters in the region with connections to Cuba. Even the fall of a small remote country to communism could upend the U.S. position in the region, or so the thinking of the domino theory went.

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<sup>366</sup> Cuban training of Latin American Subversives, March 16, 1963, CIA/CREST.

<sup>367</sup> Stephen Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, pp. 135-138.

In the wake of the missile crises the Kennedys wanted attacks against Castro, by the CIA and by willing exiles. That would be the new Cuba plan. Disorganization in the exile community did not stop the administration from seeing them as a useful, even vital, element of its emerging anti-Castro program. As of June 1963 the CIA moved to support various militant outfits intent on striking Cuba as part of the administration's overall covert campaign, which the president had ordered. There was to be a mix of sabotage operations. The CIA would stage some raids itself through its own resources, while selected Cuban exiles would unleash attacks of their own with support and encouragement from the CIA. In the past the CIA had endeavored, if unsuccessfully, to ensure that it controlled all raids carried out by exiles against Cuba.<sup>368</sup> The program that shaped up in mid 1963 in response the Kennedys' request for more covert action essentially allowed designated exile groups to take CIA support and conduct operations at their own discretion. Facing complaints from Moscow and Havana, the administration did take some pro forma steps toward curbing exile raids and made a very public display of placing travel restrictions on certain exiles in the Miami area.<sup>369</sup> But the move amounted to little more than a smokescreen for the underlying policy of support for militant exile activity. In the end the administration made no meaningful effort to stop the exile raids, because such attacks were integral to the revamped covert campaign against Cuba.

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<sup>368</sup> Memorandum for the Standing Group of the National Security Council, Proposed Covert Policy and Integrated Program of Action towards Cuba, June 8, 1963, Box 232, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>369</sup> *New York Times*, April 1, 1963.

As the summer of 1963 wore on, the despair that had clouded the hopes of much of the exile community earlier in the year gave way to a sense of optimism and excitement. New plans for a move against Castro were afoot, this time instigated by the Nicaraguan President Luis Somoza. President Somoza had traveled to the Miami area in July and met with various exile leaders, opening the possibility of hosting a rebel base in Nicaragua or another country in Central America. In August several Cuban exile leaders traveled to Nicaragua for talks with Somoza, including Artime, a figure widely regarded within the exile community as on the CIA payroll. The fact that Somoza was moving so openly to court Cuban exiles suggested to many that Nicaragua and perhaps other countries in Central America were at work on a new effort against Castro. No such activity could go on, many felt, without tacit approval from the United States. Moreover, Artime was rumored to be RFK's favored Cuban exile leader. Some in the exile community believed that RFK had personally urged Somoza to unite rebel groups behind Artime.<sup>370</sup> The rumors held truth. By July of 1963 the CIA had moved to support Artime, among other militant exiles, and his operations outside the United States, with approval from the attorney general and other top administration officials.<sup>371</sup>

The CIA scheduled a number of its own covert operations to continue through the summer and fall of 1963, and the president continued to approve them personally

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<sup>370</sup> Memorandum to FBI director regarding Castro opposition activities, Aug. 7, 1963, JFK Assassination Records, FBI Files, NARA Record No. 124-10286-10441.

<sup>371</sup> FBI memorandum, CIA Liaison Material, July 16, 1963, JFK Assassination Records, FBI Files, NARA Record No. 124-90140-10013.

as late as mid November.<sup>372</sup> From the CIA's perspective the attacks accomplished little. Raid after raid failed as before, with Castro's forces often capturing the infiltrators as they reached Cuban shores.<sup>373</sup> Doubts about the wisdom of the covert program, evident from the beginning despite the Kennedys' insistence, deepened within the administration in the latter part of 1963 as well. In the months immediately after the Cuban missile crisis some in the White house had simply wondered whether such attacks were helpful to the overall goal of deposing Castro. Now Rusk for one was arguing that the raids actually worsened matters by complicating relations with the Moscow and increasing the likelihood of Soviet troops staying in Cuba in large numbers for the long term.<sup>374</sup>

Nevertheless, JFK kept okaying CIA operations and did little to stop independent exile actions, evidently sharing RFK's view that something should be done even if odds of actually harming Castro in a meaningful way were low. The Kennedys' standing order to attack Castro remained in place, and the CIA acted on it. The raids were not the only method. The CIA also launched a new assassination plot against Castro involving a senior Cuban official, Rolando Cubela Secades. Seeking a potential defector from inside the regime, the CIA successfully recruited Cubela in August of 1963. Disillusioned with Castro, Cubela told the CIA he would eliminate Castro if the administration backed a coup. In October, Cubela, whose CIA

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<sup>372</sup> Memorandum for the record, Meeting on Policy Relating to Cuba, Nov. 12, 1963. FRUS V. XI, 1961-1963, 375.

<sup>373</sup> Richard Helms, in recorded interview with WGH, 1986, WGBH Media Archives and Library, Boston. Available online as part of the Open Vault Collection: <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/wpna-e5183a-interview-with-richard-helms-1986>.

<sup>374</sup> Memorandum for the record, Meeting on Policy Relating to Cuba, Nov. 12, 1963. FRUS V. XI, 1961-1963, 375.

codename was AMLASH, met with his CIA handler in Paris. Cubela demanded an audience with RFK as show of the administration's seriousness in backing the emerging plans, which at that date amounted to little more than an agreement to go forward with a plot. RFK did not meet with Cubela but likely knew about him. Desmond FitzGerald, who did meet with Cubela, replaced Harvey as chief of operations for Cuba and regularly kept the attorney general apprised of covert operations.<sup>375</sup> Definitive proof of RFK's knowledge of AMLASH or any of the CIA's plots against Castro in 1963 remains elusive. But the fact that RFK and other senior White House officials regularly discussed the sudden death of Castro when mulling options in Cuba suggests at the very least that the CIA's efforts to kill Castro were generally known at the most senior levels in the administration.

On November 12, the president, the attorney general, McCone and McNamara took stock of Cuba operations. Bundy and Rusk joined the discussion, as did a number of CIA men involved, including Helms, Cheever and Fitzgerald. McCone opened the meeting with the usual overview. He mentioned Hurricane Flora, which slammed Cuba early in October. Initially the CIA said the storm had a devastating effect on the Cuban economy, but now the damage appeared to be lower than originally estimated. The Soviets, meanwhile, continued to withdraw some military personnel, but new troops continued to arrive at the same time. McCone said that the Soviets seemed to be establishing military assistance mission in Cuba similar to the one the United States had in Vietnam. The Soviets appeared to be training Cubans

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<sup>375</sup> Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, pp. 271-273.

for all kinds of military activity, including handling of missiles. As many as 50 new Soviet tanks had arrived as well. The CIA continued to maintain a small network of intelligence operatives, who mostly kept watch on the Havana area. But their work was perilous. Castro's internal security forces were as effective as ever, and the CIA estimated that about 25 U.S. spies had been killed or captured in the past year.<sup>376</sup>

The CIA reported some newfound hope, however, in efforts to stir dissent in Castro's officer corps. The agency had identified 54 Cuba military leaders who might be interested in overthrowing Castro. The CIA had three contacts in Cuba who moved in military circles, and the plan going forward was to have these CIA operatives connect the would-be military conspirators against Castro with one another to get them thinking and talking about a possible move against the regime. More visibly, the CIA had recently staged four sabotage operations, hitting a power plant, a sawmill, oil storage facilities and a floating crane in one of Cuba's harbors. The CIA was also still moving forward in support of Artime's group, which was in the process of establishing bases in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. The exile outfit headed by Manolo Ray was also in the process of establishing a base outside the United States, possibly in Costa Rica. Once these groups had operational facilities, Fitzgerald said, then they would become much more effective instruments against Castro for the administration to use. Fitzgerald went on, offering an overview of some upcoming operations that needed high-level approval. The CIA wanted to stage further attacks targeting a large oil refinery and storage facilities, a large electrical plant, sugar

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<sup>376</sup> State Department memorandum for the record, Special Group meeting No. 105, Nov. 12, 1963, FRUS V. XI, 376.

refineries, railroad bridges, docks and ships. The group discussed whether airstrikes might be used against some of those targets and left off saying the CIA should proceed with planning along those lines with action likely coming in January.<sup>377</sup> The other big play in the works on Cuba, a potential game changer, was the administration's long-running effort to catch Castro sending arms to insurgents somewhere in Latin America. The idea was that if Castro were caught in the act, then a military operation to remove him could go forward under the banner of the Organization of American States. The president and his advisors ordered the CIA and the Navy to step up surveillance of Cuban shipping in the hope of catching a Cuban arms shipment within the next 90 days.<sup>378</sup>

None of the administration's efforts seemed to have any effect on Castro. The regime appeared unshaken by anything the administration hurled at it. And all the administration's actions went largely unappreciated by the exile community. On November 18, the president made public appearances in Tampa and Miami. The president received a tepid reception from the Cuban exile community. Indeed, the CIA Miami station worked hard to prevent sizable demonstrations that numerous exile groups were planning to protest U.S. policies. The ill will among the exiles, never regarded as an especially content group, had reached a level that drew the concern of Helms, who informed McCone, Bundy and RFK about the happenings in

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<sup>377</sup> State Department memorandum for the record, Special Group meeting No. 105, Nov. 12, 1963, FRUS V, XI, 376.

<sup>378</sup> State Department memorandum for the record, Special Group meeting No. 105, Nov. 12, 1963, FRUS V, XI, 376.

Miami surrounding the president's visit.<sup>379</sup> In short, Castro's Cuba remained a source of frustration all around during the final days of the Kennedy administration. The only way the administration saw to break the unhappy status quo was outright military action or perhaps the remote possibility of a surprise coup in Havana, but neither scenario appeared likely in the days before President Kennedy's death.

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<sup>379</sup> Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence, the Effects of the President's Miami Visit and of his IAPA Address Upon the Cuban Exile Community, Nov. 21, 1963, Box 209, Attorney General Papers, Confidential File, John F. Kennedy Library.

## Conclusion

RFK's involvement in national security policy came to an abrupt end with President Kennedy's assassination November 22, 1963. Cuba and Vietnam remained the foremost national security issues for President Johnson once he assumed office, and his earliest meetings with McCone, Bundy and others mostly revolved around those two issues. RFK was not included in the talks. McCone in fact urged Johnson not to see the attorney general until after the first of the year. Bundy assured Johnson that RFK had been told not to expect the same openness from the Oval Office. Bundy also told Johnson that it would be up to the president to decide how much involvement RFK would have going forward in intelligence and national security issues. Johnson expressed no interest seeing RFK take part in national security issues any more. In fact, Johnson made it very clear from the start of his time as president that he did not want RFK in the administration at all.<sup>380</sup>

At times after President Kennedy's death RFK's friends among the national security team in the Johnson administration kept him apprised of developments on certain issues, but the attorney general never again had any significant say on such policy matters. RFK remained squarely on the sidelines until eventually leaving the administration in September of 1964 amid an increasingly venomous political feud with President Johnson. After that RFK began remaking himself as a possible White House contender focused primarily on domestic issues. But what mark, if any, did

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<sup>380</sup> DCI meetings with President Johnson Nov. 23 through Dec. 31, 1963, JFK Assassination Records, CIA Files, NARA Record No. 104-10306-10018.

RFK leave on foreign policy under President Kennedy? RFK certainly treaded heavily everywhere he went in the national security establishment. The attorney general treated the CIA director like an employee, challenged the Pentagon brass in Cabinet meetings, dressed down ranking diplomats at the State Department and ordered White House foreign policy experts like Schlesinger to shut up when he felt the need -- to mention but a few of the ways RFK exercised his dubious authority on national security matters. Brash and assertive, RFK seemed to play a major role in every weighty national security issue after the Bay of Pigs as he functioned as a minister without portfolio enjoying the president's personal approval. But assessing RFK's actual impact accurately requires dividing his activities into three roles: RFK as foreign policy advisor, RFK as high-level envoy and RFK as executive.

As an advisor RFK held little influence. Most of the time the national security establishment treated RFK with deference as he expressed thoughts on matters ranging from the internal security of Iran to damn construction in West Africa. But generally the senior national security team, including the president, steered away from RFK's policy proposals. This was the case during the Dominican Republic crisis of 1961, when RFK was heard but roundly ignored as he called for drastic military action. The Berlin crisis of 1961 serves as another example of RFK's usual inability to shape major national security decisions. RFK wanted to put America publically on a war footing, effectively escalating an already dangerous confrontation. His ideas were mostly disregarded. Attorney General Kennedy's calls for military action during the Cuban Missile Crisis went unheeded. And RFK

struggled likewise later in multiple debates about Vietnam to hold real sway over decisions. Again and again the views RFK voiced during the making of national security policy decisions failed to shape outcomes in a meaningful way, most dramatically so during the prelude to the 1963 Saigon coup.

As a messenger RFK effectively relayed critical communications in vital moments between the White House and the Kremlin. A certain air of drama sometimes surrounded the delivery of those messages, especially in moments when RFK lost his temper. But this role should not be overstated in terms of its significance. RFK in these moments served simply as a conduit. The attorney general never negotiated with Bolshakov or Dobrynin. He simply presented policies that had already been crafted through deliberations at the White House to his Soviet interlocutors and relayed what messages he received from them. RFK was not even the only backchannel President Kennedy used. White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger also worked with Bolshakov in handling discreet messages between the White House and the Kremlin.<sup>381</sup> RFK's lack of meaningful impact in this role is perhaps best illustrated in his exchanges with Dobrynin during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when RFK faithfully carried a message outlining the White House's proposal for a resolution even though RFK openly opposed the president's plan.

RFK's demonstrated inability to have a major impact on foreign policy as an advisor or a trusted messenger holds significance by presenting a finding that challenges the widespread understanding of how the Kennedy administration made

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<sup>381</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 501.

major foreign policy decisions. Throughout the historiography the dominant narrative of the Kennedy administration's foreign policy process shows President Kennedy increasingly relying on a tight inner circle of advisers for major foreign policy decisions in the wake of the Bay of Pigs. RFK was integral to that tight inner circle yet unable to affect decisions significantly. RFK's lack of impact, despite all his assiduous efforts, suggests that forces other than the individual influences of policy makers were more important to outcomes. The fact that RFK often found himself unable to influence foreign policy decisions forces consideration of new historical analyses of the Kennedy administration emphasizing structuralism in national security decision making rather than the individual actions of key players. What becomes clear when examining RFK's experience in dealing with national security issues is that shared assumptions about the Cold War among senior administration officials formed a paradigm virtually impervious to logic, as RFK's efforts to argue against the 1963 coup in Saigon demonstrated. President Kennedy personally instilled one of the most important and erroneous assumptions at the base of the paradigm by insisting early on that the Soviet Union was pursuing a campaign of communist revolution in the Third World even when no evidence supported the Kremlin's bombastic claim. Faith in the effectiveness of counterinsurgency strategy as a method to confront this perceived threat formed another structural feature of the Kennedy administration groupthink on the Cold War, as did the flawed assumption of Soviet military strength on the ground in Europe. Historians looking to

illuminate the Kennedy administration's foreign policy processes in the future can no longer rely on the standard narrative as a basis for exploration in light of RFK's demonstrated inability to operate outside the paradigm. Most often RFK's could not even extend his thinking beyond the working national security assumptions that formed the paradigm. In the one instance late in 1963 when RFK did challenge administration groupthink based on dubious assumptions he failed to alter the course of action. In short, individual influence counted for little on national security policy for one of the most influential individuals. Thus a more sophisticated analytical approach rooted in structuralism is most likely needed to explain the actions of the Kennedy administration in the realm of foreign policy going forward.

To be sure, RFK did indeed have an impact in his role as the executive tasked with overseeing the administration's campaign against Castro after the Bay of Pigs, but a nuanced distinction between policymaking and policy implementation is needed to understand this properly. RFK did not make a difference in formulating policy on Cuba. He and the president were in effect of one mind on that from the beginning and remained so through the end of the Kennedy administration, both embracing the Eisenhower administration's overthrow policy as a major objective within the constructs of the Cold War. No evidence suggests that the Kennedy brothers ever diverged significantly in their thinking about plans and actions for Cuba. They worked in concert on the issue from the Bay of Pigs onward. But RFK made a major difference in implementation of the Kennedy administration's policy. Without RFK

the CIA would not likely have been nearly as responsive to the president's desire to keep up efforts against Castro, since the CIA felt so badly burned in the Bay of Pigs. Few in the CIA really wanted to go aggressively after Castro again, and the doubters about the wisdom of such an effort ranged from McCone to Harvey. But RFK's relentless pressure on the agency ensured they worked hard at it and thus directly contributed to an increase in the tempo and destructiveness of U.S. attacks on Cuba.

Evidence of this impact becomes visible in part by charting the pace of U.S. covert operations from the Eisenhower administration to the Johnson administration. The Eisenhower administration undertook 170 major covert operations in eight years. The Kennedy administration launched 163 major covert operations in roughly three years. And the Johnson administration staged 142 major covert operations through February of 1967.<sup>382</sup> If broken down into annual activity, the figures mean that the Kennedy administration undertook more than double the amount of covert operations per year than Eisenhower administration did. And covert operations dropped by roughly half while President Johnson was in office. The Cuba project, in all its iterations, undoubtedly accounted for the bulk of these covert actions during the Kennedy administration since it was the CIA's largest program anywhere in the world at the time. Thus the correlation between the steep rise in covert operations and RFK's involvement with the CIA offers one measure of his impact as an implementer of foreign policy.

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<sup>382</sup> *Final Report of the Select Committee To Study Governmental Operations With Respect to Intelligence Activities, United States Senate, Book I, Foreign and Military Intelligence, 1976, pp. 56-57.*

Another measure of RFK's impact as an implementer comes in the impression all this work by the attorney general made on Castro, a man who understandably made it his business to identify U.S. machinations against him. Castro believed that RFK, not the president, drove the U.S. plots to overthrow him during the Kennedy administration.<sup>383</sup> RFK's reputation as a zealot among Cuban exiles alone was enough to foster such suspicions in Castro, who might have also ventured this opinion on the basis of intelligence information his government gathered. RFK engaged in nothing short of micromanagement of CIA anti-Castro operations. And at the same time RFK launched what could be considered a parallel operation of his own, running a CIA operative personally and keeping up his own personal ties with Cuban militants. RFK forcefully instilled energy and urgency in U.S. plots against Castro during the Kennedy administration, but RFK cannot be considered effective ultimately in his implementation of this policy given the simple fact that Castro stayed in power. RFK's biggest management project, leading the largest CIA program in the world at the height of the Cold War, was an unqualified failure with a legacy that literally still lives today.

The image of RFK angrily waging a secret war against Castro involving murder plots and collusion with organized crime stands in stark contrast to the image RFK conjures today in historical memory. Even historians eager to believe RFK underwent a profound internal transformation struggle to explain the disparity. Evan Thomas argues, convincingly, that RFK only began to shift his political attitudes in

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<sup>383</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, *The Atlantic*, Nov. 20, 2013.

the winter of 1966. Up to then RFK had remained ambivalent about the U.S. effort in Vietnam and tepid toward the idea of domestic reform rooted in the ideals of social justice, situating himself as identifiably conservative on the two most prominent issues of the time.<sup>384</sup> RFK's political evolution from there over the next two years appears cautious and halting, seemingly reflecting more the tactics of a seasoned politician aiming for high office than the zealotry of a convert soulfully embracing a new ideology. And yet by the time of his death RFK stood as the torchbearer of postwar American liberalism and, most importantly, the voice of reason on Vietnam to those who wished to see an end to the U.S. intervention.

There is little evidence to suggest that RFK fully abandoned major elements of his political thinking in just two years. RFK's hawkishness on foreign policy, rooted in a Cold War conservatism defined by the likes of Hoover and McCarthy, exemplified a dominant trait of his worldview. During the Kennedy administration RFK was in a position to take action on these beliefs, and those actions, despite their overall ineffectiveness, revealed a depth of personal animus and myopia in RFK difficult to square the liberal image his celebrity persona emanated in 1968 and in decades afterward up to the present time. The enduring image of RFK the iconic liberal is more a product of shifting perceptions than a reflection of a changed man. The image of RFK crystalized in 1968 is best seen as an illusion that arose in the minds of liberals desperate for a political leader amid the rising tide of conservatism and the splintering of the political left in the 1960s. To many, RFK

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<sup>384</sup> Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, pp. 311-319.

before he died became a symbol of liberalism's hope for surviving as a viable political force in American politics in the face of the Silent Majority and the New Left. RFK appeared to embrace this label chiefly as a matter of political expedience as he pursued the presidency, though some genuine political sentiments undoubtedly reinforced his new stance. In this way a kind of myth about RFK flourished during his final years, and the illusion fit seamlessly into the larger mythology of Camelot after RFK died.<sup>385</sup> A truer understanding of RFK and his place in history will flow from the kind of revisionist inquiry presented here. New evidence certain to emerge in coming years through declassification must be examined with a fresh lens, one eschewing the deeply flawed narratives that currently form historical memory on the subject.

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<sup>385</sup> See Ronald Steel's *In Love with Night: The American Romance with Robert Kennedy* for an expansive discussion on the origin and meaning of RFK's image.

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