

Utter failure at Bay of Pigs enabled Kennedy to succeed later in serving mankind



FIFTY YEARS AGO today the United States attempted to topple Fidel Castro's Communist regime by supporting the invasion of 1,200

Cuban nationalists at

the Bay of Pigs. The failed invasion not only intensified the Cold War by emboldening the Soviet Union to place offensive missiles in Cuba, but convinced President John F. Kennedy that there should be greater civilian control over national security.

Since 1959 when Fidel Castro's Communist rebels overthrew dictator Fulgencia Batista, a U.S. ally, Cuban-American relations had been strained. Castro expropriated the private property of major American corporations which for decades had dominated the Cuban economy.

The U.S. retaliated by expelling Cuba from the Organization of American States and breaking all economic and diplomatic ties with the Latin American country. The Eisenhower administration feared that Castro was leaning towards an alliance with the

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Soviet Union, something that might trigger a domino effect in the Caribbean basin.

Such an alliance not only challenged the Monroe Doctrine, which outlawed the financial or military interference of European nations in the western hemisphere, but also posed a national security threat for the United States.

To thwart the possibility, the Central Intelligence Agency, headed by Allen Dulles, began to train anti-Castro exiles to storm Cuba, infiltrate the general population and lead an uprising.

When Kennedy assumed office in January 1961, he learned of the plan to train, arm and transport the Cuban nationalists, and he approved it as long as it didn't involve the United States in a combat scenario. Dulles and the Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed, believing that the young president

would change his mind if, in the course of the invasion, the freedom fighters required American military support.

On April 17, 1961, American aircraft flew 1,200 Cuban nationalists from the Nicaraguan coast where they had been training to Cuba where they stormed the Bay of Pigs. But Castro was prepared for the invasion and his troops began cutting down the freedom fighters.

When Dulles and the Joint Chiefs appealed to Kennedy to provide air and naval support, the president denied their request. As a result, Castro's army pinned down the exiles and forced them to surrender within 72 hours.

The failed invasion inflicted a severe blow to American prestige. The U.S. had not only violated agreements that guaranteed the self-determination of hemispheric neighbors, but it stood exposed worldwide for attempting to overthrow a sovereign government.

In addition, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, emboldened by the failed invasion, placed offensive nuclear

missiles in Cuba in October 1962 to gain a strategic advantage in the Cold War.

To his credit, Kennedy took full responsibility for the failed invasion. But the young president had also become distrustful of the CIA and Joint Chiefs. He dismissed Dulles as CIA director and gave Robert McNamara, former CEO of the Ford Motor Company, carte blanche to centralize authority in the Defense Department, largely ignoring the Pentagon.

Kennedy also appointed General Maxwell Taylor, a military bureaucrat, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Taylor would be used to run interference for the administration by misleading the Chiefs, the press and the National Security Council whenever it was expedient.

When Kennedy learned that the Soviets were deploying offensive missiles in Cuba, he sidestepped the usual diplomatic protocol. Instead of working with the State Department and Pentagon, he organized a select executive committee of his most trusted advisers to explore the alternatives.

No longer would he allow the mil-

itary and intelligence establishments to pressure him into a decision. Kennedy was able to resolve the missile crisis by establishing a naval blockade around Cuba and forcing Khrushchev to remove the missiles in return for his promise not to invade the island.

What's more, Kennedy's flirtation with nuclear Armageddon convinced him to pursue a more open dialogue with the Soviet Union, which resulted in the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and banning atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons.

To be sure, President Kennedy's misguided effort at the Bay of Pigs was an unnecessary risk that might have plunged the United States into nuclear war with the Soviet Union. But he also learned from his mistakes, considering more carefully his responsibilities to the American people. In the end, Kennedy was able to transform an embarrassing defeat into a victory for mankind.

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THE TIMES LEADER

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