

WAR ON THE ROCKS

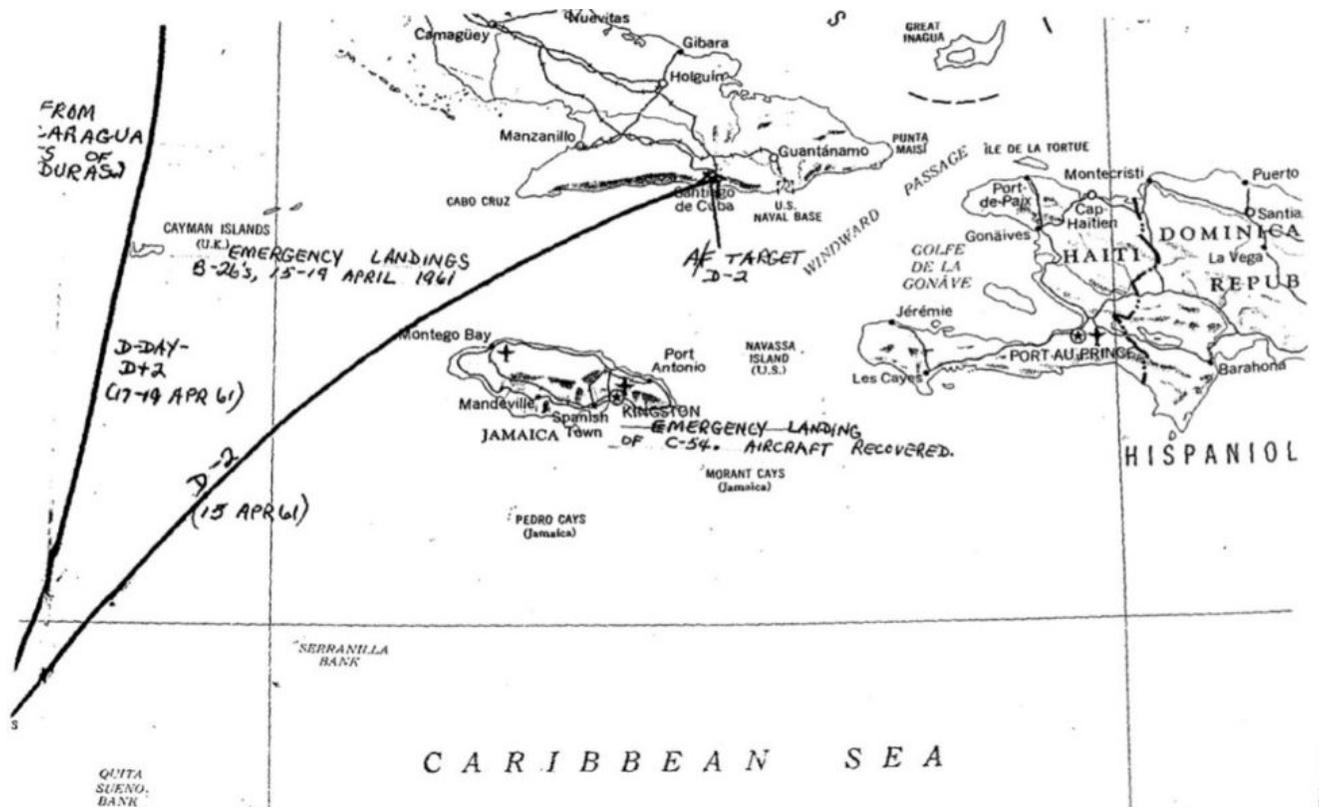


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SPY VS. SPY: THE BAY OF PIGS AND THE BATTLE FOR THE SOUL OF THE CIA

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CIA officials have finally lost the last of their efforts to keep the agency's reports and internal histories about the Bay of Pigs invasion secret. The CIA's attempt to overthrow Cuban dictator Fidel Castro in April 1961 remains one of the most controversial events in the agency's history. The National Security Archive worked tirelessly to declassify the two main reports involved: first, Inspector General Lyman Kirkpatrick's scathing critique and second, the response to it by Deputy Director for Plans Richard

Bissell and his deputy Tracy Barnes. Both were hastily produced in the months following the operation's failure. After these victories for declassification, the National Security Archive forced the CIA to publish its internal histories, which staff historian Jack Pfeiffer wrote between 1979 and 1984. And just two months ago, it got the agency to release the draft of the fifth volume of these histories: Pfeiffer's "CIA's Internal Investigation of the Bay of Pigs," which revisits Kirkpatrick, Bissell, and Barnes' heated exchange.

Pfeiffer intended "to put one of [the CIA's] nastiest internal power struggles into proper perspective" when he began researching this in-house dispute. But, as David Robarge, the agency's current senior historian, has clarified, Pfeiffer's superiors rejected his draft submission "because of serious shortcomings in scholarship, its polemical tone, and its failure to add significantly to an understanding of the controversy." Thus, the CIA's lawyers argued that declassifying it would only confuse the public. These arguments failed to persuade the courts, however, and the public can now read it themselves. An opportunity has arisen, then, to put this power struggle, which Pfeiffer characterizes as "a skunk pissing contest," into proper perspective while explaining what it was about and clearing up any lingering confusion.

This matters because those who have approached these reports and histories thus far, from the National Security Archive to the press, have tended to celebrate their victory in exposing the CIA's embarrassment while failing to explain why agency officials feel embarrassed and what their embarrassment reveals. They have missed the most dramatic part of the CIA's early organizational history, when Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles and others debated what kind of intelligence service the

agency should be — and whether covert operators should be the ones to define and lead it. This remains a dramatic story of intra-service maneuvering worthy of a John le Carré novel. So, buckle up.

How the Battle Began

The CIA launched an amphibious, paramilitary invasion of Cuba in April 1961. The agency hoped this would spark a larger uprising against the Castro regime that would lead to its overthrow. But Castro defeated the CIA's proxy forces within two days, embarrassing President John Kennedy, who lost confidence in the agency's senior leadership thereafter. Kennedy famously asked: "How could I have been so stupid?" The president commissioned a government-wide investigation, which his military advisor, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, chaired. Taylor's people deflected as much blame as they could from Kennedy, who had cancelled some of the airstrikes because he feared the invasion was looking more like Normandy than the covert operation it was supposed to be. The president had also declined to order American forces into the fight once the CIA's beachhead collapsed. Taylor cited a shortage of ammunition on the beach caused by faulty operational planning, development, and support.

Director Dulles served as a member of the Taylor group and was thus able to influence some of its findings. However, he was increasingly isolated and fighting a rearguard action. The Pentagon took the position that the invasion had been the CIA's operation from start to finish, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff openly disavowed any responsibility for it. Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen. David Shoup, for example, testified that he had had misgivings about the invasion since its inception. This prompted Dulles' desperate interjection:

Do you realize how many military men we had on this task force? Some of your very best officers. We took a great deal of responsibility, but we called on the Defense Department and I looked to them for military judgments. I didn't look to our people for military judgments.

Inspector General Kirkpatrick initiated his internal investigation into the Directorate of Plans' conduct and management of the Bay of Pigs in this environment. But, he was making a larger case and was not especially interested in the Bay of Pigs *per se*. Rather, he seized upon the operation as ammunition to use in a much larger power struggle.

Bureaucratic Washington had been mired in conflict over what exactly the CIA should be since the Truman administration and Congress created it in 1947. Dulles, who romanticized covert operations and was generally bored with espionage, counterintelligence, and analysis, initially prevailed. He established a pro-covert operations Clandestine Service in summer 1952 and then gave it preeminence within the agency after President Dwight Eisenhower appointed him Director of Central Intelligence in early 1953.

Dulles' preference for covert operations produced far-reaching consequences at the CIA for the remainder of the 1950s. As one influential historian has phrased it, Dulles' covert operators colonized the agency. This meant that case officers specializing in espionage, who Kirkpatrick was helping to lead, assumed a subordinate role within the Directorate of Plans. Thus the CIA became an interventionist, intelligence service-in-arms, running ambitious covert operations to overthrow governments in Iran, Guatemala, and Indonesia before stumbling into the Bay of Pigs. Although

the agency's other functions, including espionage, counterintelligence, and the production and dissemination of national intelligence continued, these became less important to the agency's leadership.

None of this ever sat well with Kirkpatrick and his colleagues, who became more or less second-class citizens at the CIA. When Dulles reified the Clandestine Service, he also reaffirmed Frank Wisner's position as Deputy Director for Plans. Wisner, like Dulles, was a covert operations enthusiast with little use for case officers who specialized in espionage. Indeed, he had once disdained them as "a bunch of old washerwomen gossiping over their laundry." Wisner had overseen a long list of failed covert operations in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the early years of the Cold War. Meanwhile, Dulles named Kirkpatrick "chief of operations/plans" (COPS), and placed him and all espionage activities under Wisner's authority. But then Kirkpatrick contracted polio and was reassigned as inspector general. Richard Helms, an espionage specialist, replaced him as COPS.

Helms became quite senior in knowledge and experience within the Clandestine Service through the rest of the 1950s. But he dealt primarily with foreign intelligence, counterintelligence, and personnel rather than covert operations. He remained COPS even after Wisner retired in 1958. Dulles named Bissell, a covert operations enthusiast who had been working on the CIA's U-2 reconnaissance program, as Wisner's successor. Dulles told a disappointed Helms that this was a matter of keeping the agency visible and relevant in budget-conscious Washington.

We have to face the fact that because espionage is relatively cheap it will probably always seem inconsequential to some of our less informed friends on the Hill...They're accustomed to dealing in billions. What kind of impression can it make when I come along and ask for a few hundred thousand dollars and a bag of pennies? Believe me, I know the way they think up there. If there's no real money involved, it can't be important, and they just won't pay much attention to us.

Helms resented this but soldiered on. He had even more reason to resent it when an arrogant Bissell and Barnes, excluded him from everything the two considered important — the CIA's ongoing covert operations, which they tended to micromanage — and told him to continue handling the less dramatic intelligence duties he had supervised since becoming COPS. This produced friction between them. Thus in one case officer's words, Bissell and Helms reached an accommodation: "Bissell left spies to Helms. And Helms left the Bay of Pigs to Bissell."

Sort of. Some evidence suggests that Helms undermined the Bay of Pigs operation. Kirkpatrick documented how "on at least two occasions [Helms] was given express warnings that the project was being perilously mismanaged, but he declined to involve himself." While preparing their response, Bissell and Barnes asked Helms if this were true. He replied that he "could not remember receiving any such warnings." Kirkpatrick also noted the directorate's heads and station chiefs sent the task force the CIA's lowest-ranked case officers, or as Pfeiffer phrased it, the task force's staff functioned as "an elephant's burial ground for marginal performers."

Helms very likely contributed to this. “I’ve always been your friend,” he told one colleague. “I didn’t offer that job to you.” But for such tantalizing fragments, however, whatever exactly Helms did or did not do to undermine the Bay of Pigs remains off the record. Most agree, in any case, that other contributing factors, from Kennedy’s intervening in the operation’s planning to the CIA’s mismanagement, primarily explain its failure.

What Kirkpatrick’s Report Found

Inspector General Kirkpatrick’s report on the Bay of Pigs faulted Dulles, Bissell, and Barnes for rank incompetence. He documented how they remained more in touch with policymakers in Washington than with the actual operation in Miami, the training site in Guatemala, and Cuba. He also showed how they refused to listen to Cuban exile leaders and how they were unable to properly train the Cuban forces they had recruited because neither they nor the personnel they assigned to do this spoke Spanish. Their air supply operations were disastrous as well. At least one pilot got lost and had to make an emergency landing in Mexico where authorities impounded the aircraft. And one agent-in-place stormed out of his position in Cuba to come to Miami, where he demanded that the CIA cease air drops to his resistance group because the agency’s ineptitude (it had dropped leaflets directly onto his home) threatened to expose him to Castro’s security forces. Thus, Kirkpatrick recommended that the CIA empower intelligence officers and analysts, particularly those who wrote the agency’s estimates, to review covert operators’ plans in the future. He passed his report directly to Dulles, his successor John McCone, and Kennedy’s intelligence advisory board. Attorney General Robert Kennedy received a copy as well.

Kirkpatrick's recommendations clearly called for a reversal of the mission priorities and organizational hierarchy that Dulles had established in 1952. His distribution of the report to incoming Director McCone and, apparently, to Attorney General Kennedy, went far outside the office of inspector general's normal reporting channels. And Dulles, Bissell, and Barnes interpreted all of this as a threat. Indeed, Pfeiffer's history describes how Dulles and his deputy, Charles Cabell, confronted Kirkpatrick in his office. One witness recalled "an extremely stormy session. Dulles, once a close friend of Kirkpatrick, did not even speak to Kirkpatrick for over a year following the meeting." Pfeiffer also explains how Cabell, assigned to minimize the damage, asked McCone to keep the report in-house. "In unfriendly hands, it can become a weapon unjustifiably to attack the entire mission, organization, and functioning of the Agency."

But it was too late to bury Kirkpatrick's report. So, Barnes penned a response to it. Barnes reiterated the view that the Bay of Pigs represented a larger, government-wide failure and that, since Kennedy had cancelled some of the operation's airstrikes, the operation's concept remained untested. Kirkpatrick, he said, did not understand covert operations and was unqualified to criticize them. The inspector general had exaggerated the significance of the task force's Spanish-language deficiencies, too, Barnes claimed. He insisted that the CIA's paramilitary instructors taught their Cuban trainees just fine without using Spanish. Barnes asked Bissell to forward his views to McCone, particularly his judgment that Kirkpatrick's report remained "an incompetent job," "biased," and "malicious."

As we can read in Pfeiffer's history, Director McCone, barely sworn in, punted. He deemed both sides of the exchange "extreme," and he bound the dueling reports together into a single document, recommending that

Kennedy's advisory board read them together. Thus, they remain together to this day.

Where Does Pfeiffer Fit into This?

Pfeiffer's history shows that the CIA, particularly Pfeiffer and those Bay of Pigs veterans he interviewed, remained emotional about the operation well into Director Bill Casey's tenure as DCI in the 1980s. Indeed, Pfeiffer joined the fray. He sided against Kirkpatrick and his staff, repeatedly assailing their competency and motives. He even questioned their mental health. Some of his writing was mean-spirited, such as his allegations that Kirkpatrick

wanted Bissell's job...At risk of venturing into psychohistory, a part of the explanation of why Kirkpatrick wanted Bissell's job is that he believed (perhaps correctly) that if he had not become physically handicapped when his career was in its ascendancy, he would have been named [Deputy Director for Plans] before Bissell.

As Pfeiffer's superiors have accurately explained, his history remains of unprofessional quality and it fails to advance the discussion much. On the other hand, it does offer some details on Kirkpatrick's staff and their methods unavailable elsewhere, and it summarizes some of the discussions that occurred at the CIA's highest levels just after the inspector general distributed his report. For researchers and the interested public who may comb through the agency's reports and internal histories on the bay of Pigs, even Pfeiffer's draft has its value. We should also understand that all of this was about much more than the Bay of Pigs. It was part of a larger power struggle over what kind of intelligence service the CIA should be. We should also keep in mind that Helms, who remained in the shadows but rose to replace Bissell as Deputy Director for Plans, seems to have won the power

struggle at the time. He served as Director of Central Intelligence under the Johnson and Nixon administrations and ran the agency much more quietly than Dulles had.

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