

HISTORY

50 Years Later: Learning From The Bay Of Pigs - “The Brilliant Disaster”

Sunday 20 March 2016, by [RASENBERGER Jim](#), [SILVERMAN Ellen](#) (Date first published: 17 April 2011).

Book Featured In This Story: *The Brilliant Disaster. JFK, Castro, and America’s Doomed Invasion of Cuba’s Bay of Pigs* by Jim Rasenberger. Scribner. Hardcover, 460 pages

Fifty years ago Sunday, a brigade of around 1,500 CIA-trained soldiers stormed the beach in Cuba’s Bay of Pigs. It was the opening phase of a secret mission to overthrow Fidel Castro and, President John F. Kennedy hoped, halt the spread of communism throughout the world.

Things did not go as planned.

“I think the thing that you have to keep in mind when you ask yourself, ‘How did this ever happen?’ is the extraordinary fear of communism in the late 50s and early 60s,” writer Jim Rasenberger tells NPR’s Noah Adams.

In his new book, *The Brilliant Disaster*, Rasenberger suggests the debacle marked the start of the Vietnam era — before which, “it would have been a fairly skeptical or cynical American who doubted he lived in a country run by competent men, engaged in worthwhile enterprises.”

The Bay of Pigs changed that.

“Not only did it appear immoral to many people,” Rasenberger says, “but it was also incompetent.”

For Kennedy, A Rock And A Hard Place

The plan for a covert, CIA-led overthrow of Fidel Castro was hatched under President Eisenhower, who increasingly saw Castro as aligned with communists in the Soviet Union.

Eisenhower insisted it must remain secret. When John F. Kennedy was elected president and presented with the mission — then still being planned — he agreed.

“He knew that if the American hand showed in this, [Soviet leader Nikita] Khrushchev would then be forced to retaliate,” Rasenberger says, leading to all-out nuclear war with the Soviet Union.

Kennedy, who had run against Richard Nixon by “beating the Eisenhower administration over the head with Castro,” Rasenberger says, could see no way not to press on with the mission.

“He had a lot of doubts about it, a lot of concerns about it, but he never could figure out a way not to do it.”

A Plan Awry, And A Tipping Point

The mission, set into motion on April 15, 1961, called for a series of air strikes to take out Castro's defenses first. Then, a brigade of 1,500 Cuban expats would land in Cuba's Bay of Pigs, storm the beach, and spark an overthrow of the Castro regime.

But from the beginning, things did not go well.

The ships that carried the brigade got hung up on coral in the Bay's shallow waters. A series of bombings on Castro's air defenses by Cuban exile B-26s — crucial if the brigade troops on the ground were to invade successfully — missed several of Castro's planes.

But the tipping point, Rasenberger says, may have come on April 16, when John F. Kennedy canceled a second series of air strikes, leaving Castro with air defenses intact and more time to prepare for the troops, which hit the beach on April 17.

"Once those second air strikes were canceled, the game was basically over," Rasenberger says. "The brigade was doomed at that point."

Eduardo Barea, a 25-year-old Cuban exile at the time, would have piloted his B-26 bomber in those air strikes. When the order came through to stop the bomb, "every pilot was surprised," Barea tells NPR. They'd been expecting to help their comrades on the ground launch a successful invasion.

"It was very difficult for me to understand," Barea says. "We never expected that something like that was going to happen."

Lessons Learned

Without air support, most of the invaders were taken prisoner and held for over a year until the Kennedy administration negotiated their release.

Despite its legacy as one of the biggest American foreign policy disasters in history, Rasenberger says it may have been the best Kennedy could have hoped for. A victory, after all, would have led to a U.S. occupation of Cuba.

"Some people say he got the best-case scenario. He went forward with it, so he looked like he was strong on communism, and yet it failed, so he didn't have to deal with some terrible consequences if it had succeeded."

Those consequences might have looked something like modern-day Iraq, Rasenberger says, or even Libya.

One lesson from the Bay of Pigs, he says: "Don't assume, when we go into another country, that immediately the locals will all come and gather behind our cause."

Another lesson — though Rasenberger says it's too early to accurately apply to Libya — "the cure may be worse than the disease." And indeed it was, "he says, after the Bay of Pigs." Castro became far more powerful after the invasion. He became more closely tied to the Soviet Union. "But the most important legacy of the Bay of Pigs may be the simplest, Rasenberger says: Murphy's Law. "Things are going to go wrong," he says.

For an administration composed of the best and the brightest, as Kennedy's was, "it would be wise for presidents to have few people in their administration more acquainted with things not going well."

Excerpt: 'The Brilliant Disaster'

Back in the first half of the twentieth century, America was a good and determined nation led by competent men and defended by an indomitable military — that, anyway, was a plausible view for Americans to hold fifty years ago. The First World War, then the Second World War, asserted and confirmed America's place of might and right in the world. Even in the decade after the Second World War, as a new conflict in Korea suggested there were limits to what the United States might accomplish abroad, it would have been a cynical American who doubted he or she lived in a powerful nation engaged in worthy exploits.

And then came the Bay of Pigs.

In the early hours of April 17, 1961, some fourteen hundred men, most of them Cuban exiles, attempted to invade their homeland and overthrow Fidel Castro. The invasion at the Bahia de Cochinos — the Bay of Pigs — quickly unraveled. Three days after landing, the exile force was routed and sent fleeing to the sea or the swamps, where the survivors were soon captured by Castro's army. Despite the Kennedy administration's initial insistence that the United States had nothing to do with the invasion, the world immediately understood that the entire operation had been organized and funded by the U.S. government. The invaders had been trained by CIA officers and supplied with American equipment, and the plan had been approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the president of the United States. In short, the Bay of Pigs had been a U.S. operation, and its failure — “a perfect failure,” historian Theodore Draper called it — was a distinctly American embarrassment. Bad enough the government had been caught bullying and prevaricating; much worse, the United States had allowed itself to be humiliated by a nation of 7 million inhabitants (compared to the United States' 180 million) and smaller than the state of Pennsylvania. The greatest American defeat since the War of 1812, one American general called it. Others were less generous. Everyone agreed on this: it was a mistake Americans would never repeat and a lesson they would never forget.

They were wrong on both counts.

Mention the Bay of Pigs to a college-educated adult American under the age of, say, fifty and you are likely to be met by tentative nods of recognition. The incident still rings discordant bells somewhere in the back of our national memory — something to do with Cuba, with Kennedy, with disaster. That phantasmagorical phrase alone — Bay of Pigs — is hard to forget, evoking images of bobbing swine in a bloodred sea (or at least it did in my mind when I first heard it). But what exactly happened at the Bay of Pigs? Many of us are no longer certain, including some of us who probably ought to be. At about the time I began thinking about this book, Dana Perino, the White House press secretary for President George W. Bush, good-naturedly confessed on a radio program that she confused “the Bay of Pigs thing” (April 1961) with the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 1962). Given that Ms. Perino was born a decade after these events, her uncertainty was understandable. But coming from the woman representing the president who launched the invasion of Iraq in 2003 — an exercise that repeated some of the very same mistakes made in Cuba in 1961 — it also was unsettling. Presumably, somebody in the Bush White House considered the history of the Bay of Pigs before sending Colin Powell to the Security Council of the United Nations (an episode, as we shall see, bearing striking similarities to Adlai Stevenson's appearance before that same body in April 1961) or ordering a

minimal force to conquer a supposedly welcoming foreign land.

Then again, if history teaches us any lesson, it is that we do not learn the lessons of history very well. Almost as soon as the mistakes of the Bay of Pigs were cataloged and analyzed by various investigative bodies, America began committing them again, not only in Cuba, but elsewhere in Latin America, in Southeast Asia, in the Middle East, in Africa. By one count, the United States has forcibly intervened, covertly or overtly, in no fewer than twenty-four foreign countries since 1961, not including our more recent twenty-first-century entanglements in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of these have arguably produced long-term benefits for the United States. Most clearly have not.

The surfeit of interventions gives rise to a fair question: considering all that has occurred since 1961, why should the Bay of Pigs still demand our attention? Next to Vietnam and Iraq, among others, the Bay of Pigs may seem a bump in the road fading mercifully in the rearview mirror. The entire event lasted a mere five days and cost the United States roughly \$46 million, less than the average budget of a Hollywood movie these days. One hundred and fourteen men were killed on the American side, and only a handful of these casualties were U.S. citizens. Add to this the fact that America was embarrassed by the Bay of Pigs and the tale has everything to recommend it for oblivion.

Even if we would forget the Bay of Pigs, though, it will not forget us. There among the mangrove swamps and the coral-jeweled waters, some part of the American story ended and a new one began. Like a well-crafted prologue, the Bay of Pigs sounded the themes, foreshadowed the conflicts, and laid the groundwork for the decades to follow. And what followed was, in no small measure, a consequence of the events in Cuba in 1961. It would be facile to credit the 1960s to a single failed invasion — many currents combined to produce that tsunami — but the Bay of Pigs dragged America into the new decade and stalked it for years to come. Three of the major American cataclysms of the '60s and early '70s — John Kennedy's assassination, the Vietnam War, and Watergate — were related by concatenation to the Bay of Pigs. No fewer than four presidents were touched by it, from Dwight Eisenhower, who first approved the "Program of Covert Action" against Castro, to Richard Nixon and the six infamous justice-obstructing words he uttered in 1972: "the whole Bay of Pigs thing."

* Excerpted from *The Brilliant Disaster: JFK, Castro, and America's Doomed Invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs* by Jim Rasenberger. Copyright 2011 by Jim Rasenberger. Excerpted by permission of Scribner.

P.S.

* NPR. Updated July 14, 2011 8:36 PM ET. Published April 17, 2011 1:59 PM ET:
<http://www.npr.org/2011/04/17/135444482/50-years-later-learning-from-the-bay-of-pigs>

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