Crisis Management at the Dead Center: The 1960-1961 Presidential Transition and the Bay of Pigs Fiasco

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Foreign policy decision making during presidential transitions is an inherently difficult challenge. By examining the 1960-1961 presidential transition and resulting Bay of Pigs fiasco, this article demonstrates that there are six independent, causal variables that best determine the success or failure of foreign policy decision making during presidential transitions: national security decision-making structure, availability of information relevant to the substance and history of the crisis and its policy responses; focus of time and resources; relevant campaign commitments; “newness” of the incoming administration; and “inheritedness” of the policy. Three of President John F. Kennedy's most important Bay of Pigs decisions are explained using this six-variable framework. Drawing from the lessons of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, recommendations are offered for how to improve future national security transitions.

It was D-Day, April 16, 1961: the landing of Brigade 2506 was hours away, and their ships were in sight of the Cuban shore. At his weekend retreat in Virginia, President Kennedy was under pressure to call off the invasion. The day before, eight B-26 bombers had attacked the main air base of the Cuban Air Force. Though implausibly staged as the action of a single Cuban defector, the cover story quickly collapsed, and the world press screamed of an American-backed invasion of Fidel Castro’s Cuba. In New York, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, was furious: the previous day he had been duped into assuring the General Assembly that the United States had nothing to do with the rogue Cuban pilot who had landed in Florida. At 9:30 p.m., the president’s assistant for national security affairs, McGeorge Bundy, called General Charles Cabell, deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), to inform him that the air...
strikes scheduled for the next day would be postponed until Brigade 2506 had landed and secured an airstrip at the Bay of Pigs, from where planes could launch and provide air support (Bissell, Lewis, and Pudlo 1996, 184). CIA appeals for more air support, directed through Secretary of State Dean Rusk, were denied by President Kennedy. Within four days, 89 members of the Brigade were killed and 1,197 taken prisoner.

President Kennedy’s decision to cancel the second air strike against Castro’s air force was likely the mistake that doomed the invasion. However, while the proximate cause of the operation’s failure was military, the more telling explanation lies with the decision-making process that led up to the operation. Scholars, historians, and participants agree that the Kennedy administration’s greatest mistake lay in its inadequate examination of the assumptions undergirding the operation, though disagreement remains over the cause of this failure.¹

The most common explanations fall roughly into four groups: unfamiliarity, secrecy, decision-making structures, and perverse bureaucratic dynamics. First, unfamiliarity: several participants viewed the lack of familiarity among Kennedy and his advisors—primarily manifest in overdeference to the president and the president’s uncertainty about how to evaluate different advisors’ opinions—as a strong contributor to his poor decision making (Schlesinger 1965, 258-59, 297; Sorensen 1965, 304, 307). Second, secrecy: many studies of the Bay of Pigs emphasize the deleterious effect of extreme covertness, as the CIA, concerned with preserving secrecy, shielded operational plans from scrutiny by relevant experts (Neustadt 1980, 222-23; Sorensen 1965, 304; Wilensky 1967, 66-67). Third, faulty decision-making structures: when Kennedy dismantled President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s national security decision-making structures, a disorganized and collegial system remained; this prevented policy from the rigorous analysis institutionalized by Eisenhower’s procedures (Bissell, Lewis, and Pudlo 1996, 197-98; Bose 1998, 100; Bowie and Immerman 1998, 6; Rothkopf 2005, 84-86). Fourth, perverse bureaucratic dynamics: Janis presents this argument most convincingly in his analysis of the Bay of Pigs episode in Groupthink, where he argues that Kennedy’s team was blinded by five common illusions that elevated unanimity over truth-seeking (1972, 14-49).

While each of these explanations acknowledges the early days of the Kennedy presidency as context, they neglect the transition itself as an explanatory variable. Although scholars of presidential transitions have noted the Bay of Pigs invasion as a cautionary tale, none have adequately examined the causal relationship between transition dynamics and President Kennedy’s decision making. Historians, for their part, have

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¹ See Irving Janis’s case study of the Bay of Pigs in Victims of Groupthink for a clear statement of what these assumptions were and why they mattered (1972, 12-29).


³ On faulty decision-making structures, see also the accounts of participants Andrew Goodpaster, Eisenhower’s staff secretary who stayed through the early days of the Kennedy administration, and Admiral Arleigh Burke, chief of naval operations during the Eisenhower administration and through the Eisenhower-Kennedy transition: Andrew J. Goodpaster, interview by Jonathan E. Lewis, Washington, DC. February 10, 1994; Arleigh Burke, oral history interview by John T. Mason, Jr., January 12, 1973, OH 284, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS (hereafter DDEL).
examined the Bay of Pigs without the analytical framework necessary for transition studies. This article suggests the best lens of analysis for the Bay of Pigs invasion is the 1960-1961 presidential transition.\footnote{4}

Drawing upon newly declassified documents—many unredacted versions released within the past decade—from the Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy Libraries, this article demonstrates that the Bay of Pigs operation’s failure was primarily a transition failure. Having done so, this article offers an analytical framework for evaluating success and failure of executive national security decision making during presidential transitions.

In a memorandum to Kennedy soon after the Bay of Pigs disaster, McGeorge Bundy wrote, “The moments of decision were not always isolated and treated with the gravity they deserved. Certain special circumstances contributed to this result, but it remains urgent that both the President and all his advisors watch closely for points of no return—even partial or interim decisions can strongly change the shape of the problem and so became decisive.”\footnote{5}

This article isolates those “partial or interim decisions” and attempt to understand the “special circumstances”—transition circumstances—that contributed to each. Kennedy failed to manage the decision-making process successfully throughout the transition. The foreign policy-making process—not outcome—is analyzed because, although there is often a correlation between successful policy process and successful outcome, a decision maker cannot control events exogenous to his government. This article focuses on three decisions that occurred prior to Kennedy’s April 14 decision to start the Bay of Pigs operation:

1. January 28, 1961: Kennedy receives his first full briefing as president on the CIA’s Cuban operation and authorizes continuation and acceleration of planning.
2. March 11, 1961: Kennedy is briefed on the CIA’s proposed operation, the “Trinidad plan.” Kennedy requests modifications to scale down the plan and make it “quieter.”
3. March 16, 1961: Kennedy is briefed on a new invasion plan, Operation ZAPATA. He authorizes continuation of ZAPATA planning and orders limited modifications.

This article uses a process-tracing methodology to analyze and evaluate executive decision making at each of these three decision nodes, within the single case study of the Bay of Pigs Operation.\footnote{6}

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\footnote{4}{Scholars have offered a variety of parameters for the “transition period,” which fall into two categories: temporal and functional. As Neustadt writes in *Presidential Power*, “A President’s transition can be defined in two ways, narrowly by the time-span between election and augural, broadly by the time until he and his principal associates become familiar with the work they have to do, including what to ask of one another and what to expect in response” (1980, 217). I choose to employ the functional definition because it ensures inclusion of all significant decisions and events related to the turnover of power between presidential administrations.}


\footnote{6}{Because this article seeks to explain why the transition-related conditions of the case caused the outcome—decision-making failure—a single case study allows an in-depth examination of the causal relationship between the independent and dependent variables that I identify. As Stephen Van Evera writes, “inferring and testing explanations that define how the independent causes the dependent variable are often easier with case-study than large-N methods” (1997, 54).}
Treating decision making success as the dependent variable, this article demonstrates the causal role of six independent variables germane to national security transitions:

1. National security decision-making structure
2. Availability of relevant information about the crisis and authoritativeness of the source of that information
3. Focus of time and resources on the policy matters in question
4. Campaign commitments related to the foreign policy area
5. “Newness” of an incoming presidential administration
6. Institutional and policy inertia, or “inheritedness” of a foreign policy

Each variable, and the interactions among them, is necessary, though not sufficient, to explain why presidents succeed or fail in managing foreign policy crises early in their administration.

A successful decision exploits information and resources to set and implement policies that advance the objectives established by the administration. In this case, Kennedy’s overarching objectives were to resist Communist encroachment in Latin America and to pursue multilateral cooperation through the Organization of American States (OAS). This strategy led to two main operational requirements: that the United States have plausible deniability of involvement and that it have a high probability of operational success. Kennedy’s support for the Bay of Pigs invasion conflicted with these objectives. His decision-making process was, therefore, a failure.

To illuminate each of Kennedy’s three decisions, this article begins with a historical narrative of the Cuban operation during the Eisenhower administration and Kennedy’s association with and knowledge of the operation prior to his inauguration in January 1961. Next, it analyzes the president’s three critical decisions on the Bay of Pigs after he was sworn in as commander in chief. Finally, using the six-variable framework for evaluating successful decision making, the article offers a half dozen overarching recommendations for improving national security decision making during presidential transitions.

**Development of a Covert Option under Eisenhower: 1959-1961**

Fidel Castro and his fellow revolutionaries of the July 26th Movement overthrew the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista in January 1959. The Eisenhower administration proceeded cautiously with the new Cuban regime, unsure of its political leanings; when Castro visited the United States in April of 1959, Vice President Richard Nixon—not President Eisenhower—met with the Cuban head of state.

Soon the Eisenhower administration changed course. Once the Soviet Union contacted Castro in October 1959 about the possibility of economic cooperation, alarm bells went off in Washington. Deeply uncomfortable with a possible Soviet satellite 90 miles off the coast of Florida, the Eisenhower administration began planning for action. At first, the CIA proposed sabotaging Cuban sugar refineries, but Eisenhower scoffed. Gordon
Gray, Eisenhower’s special assistant for national security, recalls the president telling CIA Director Allen Dulles, “Well, Allen, this is fine, but if you’re going to make any move against Castro, don’t just fool around with sugar refineries. Let’s get a program which will really do something about Castro.” Thus, in December 1959, the CIA began planning for the overthrow and possible assassination of Fidel Castro (Ambrose 1981, 308).

Ad hoc planning continued until February 1960, when Eisenhower requested a formal program, and the CIA created a task force headed by Deputy Director for Plans Richard Bissell (Bissell, Lewis, and Pudlo 1996, 153). Due to its sensitivity, the Cuba program was supervised by the 5412 Committee, named after National Security Council (NSC) Directive 5412/2, which gave this select group—a four-member subcommittee of the NSC, comprised of the deputy undersecretary of state, deputy secretary of defense, CIA director, and special assistant to the president for national security affairs—oversight of covert operations. The initial phase of Bissell’s task force planning culminated in an April policy paper entitled “A Program of Covert Action Against the Castro Regime.” In order to “bring about the replacement of the Castro regime,” Bissell’s program recommended creating a trained paramilitary force of Cuban exiles available for deployment into Cuba “to organize, train, and lead resistance forces” within six to eight months. Bissell’s plan was well received, and knowing “of no better plan for dealing with this situation,” Eisenhower approved and funded the program. Nevertheless, Eisenhower’s support was conditional upon formation of a Cuban government in exile available to replace Castro’s regime after the guerillas fomented a popular uprising. Anti-Castro planning continued through the summer and fall of 1960, accelerating in July with CIA reports of Communist arms entering Cuba (Eisenhower 1965, 535). In an important modification, due to difficulty in coordinating with anti-Castro opposition, Bissell’s team shifted from a guerilla infiltration model toward a paramilitary invasion concept (Ambrose 1981, 311; Blight and Kornbluh 1998, 25).

Though Senator John F. Kennedy’s election in November 1960 meant that a new, Democratic administration would take office, the Cuban operation did not slow—instead, it accelerated. At the end of November, Eisenhower pushed CIA planners to “be more aggressive” (Bissell, Lewis, and Pudlo 1996, 160). Of the more than 36 meetings of the 5412 Committee that discussed Cuba in the 10 months between March 17, 1960, and January 20, 1961, nearly a quarter occurred in the two months after Kennedy’s election (Prados 2006, 232). According to Bissell’s memoir, “it was during the transition period between Kennedy’s election in November and his inauguration in January that the concept of Brigade 2506 began to take its final form” (Bissell, Lewis, and Pudlo 1996, 156). Eisenhower was hoping to be able to recognize a Cuban government in exile prior to January 20, 1961 (Eisenhower 1965, 613-14). Nor did the 5412 Committee shirk

responsibility in anticipation of a “transfer” of power.\textsuperscript{10} The committee learned of the CIA’s new concept for the Cuba plan on December 8. Bissell now intended to use men training in Guatemala to conduct an amphibious landing in Cuba, seize and hold a beachhead, and then establish a provisional government (Ambrose 1981, 314). The 5412 Committee endorsed the new paramilitary concept, authorizing training for the Cuban Brigade, use of an airstrip in Nicaragua, and supply missions from the United States (Gleijeses 1995, 12).

**Cuba as a Voting Issue: Kennedy and the 1960 Election**

Having merely commented on Cuba while serving in the Senate, John F. Kennedy found his voice on the subject during the 1960 presidential election. At first, that voice was fairly moderate; in *The Strategy of Peace*, published in 1960, Kennedy proposed that Castro might have taken a “more rational course” if the United States had not been so closely aligned with Batista (1960, 133). Criticizing the Republicans for lacking “leadership and vigor” on Cuba policy, Kennedy charged that Eisenhower had neglected the plight of the Cuban people, failing to entice Castro into the American sphere and thereby transforming Cuba into a “hostile and militant Communist satellite.”\textsuperscript{11} Nevertheless, Kennedy argued, “for the present, Cuba is gone. . . . For the present no magic formula will bring it back. I have no basic disagreement with the President’s policies of recent months—for the time to save Cuba was some time ago.” Instead, Kennedy advocated resisting Communist encroachment in the rest of Latin America by focusing instead on economic progress and OAS cooperation (Schlesinger 1965, 225).

But late in October, with the candidates still neck and neck, Cuba became a headline of the campaign. The front page of the *New York Times* reported a press release by Kennedy’s campaign: “KENNEDY ASKS FOR AID FOR CUBAN REBELS TO DEFEAT CASTRO. URGES SUPPORT OF EXILES AND ‘FIGHTERS FOR FREEDOM’ ” (Ambrose 1981, 313). Incidentally this press release—intended to distract attention from Nixon’s attack on Kennedy’s position on Quemoy and Matsu—was the only public statement during the campaign that was not approved by the eventual president (Goodwin 1988). The following evening was the final Kennedy-Nixon campaign debate. Livid at the appearance of a secrecy breach by Kennedy, who the vice president thought knew about the covert operation, Nixon took a hard line *against* American support for Cuban exile fighters, even though he was opposing a view that he espoused strongly within the administration. Consequently, Kennedy was forced to defend U.S. government support for anti-Castro Cubans on a national stage, despite the contradiction of that policy with his repeatedly expressed personal views and advisors’ recommendations.

\textsuperscript{10} President Eisenhower was insistent on a “transfer” rather than a “transition” of power to Kennedy; he disliked the implication that he would have anything less than full authority until noon on January 20 (David 1961, 213).

Contrary to Nixon’s belief, Kennedy’s understanding of Cuba was probably not informed by classified U.S. intelligence. As a presidential candidate, Kennedy received three briefings from intelligence officials in 1960 (Helgerson and Center for the Study of Intelligence 1996, 52). Although the CIA had no clear policy for briefing presidential candidates, briefers often omitted highly sensitive covert actions, signal intelligence, and human intelligence programs until after the election. Kennedy also received a briefing from Dulles, on Eisenhower’s orders, with information “exclusively for [his] personal knowledge,” that was not to be shared with staff. It remains unclear exactly how much Dulles told Kennedy about the Cuba operation. Dulles’s memorandum on the Kennedy briefing mentions Cuba as a trouble spot, but does not record any conversation about covert planning (Helgerson and Center for the Study of Intelligence 1996, 54). Nixon, however, was convinced that Kennedy was briefed on covert planning “for the eventual purpose of supporting an invasion of Cuba” (Beschloss 1991, 29; Helgerson and Center for the Study of Intelligence 1996, 52; Nixon 1962, 354). When Nixon published this allegation in his 1962 memoir *Six Crises*, the Kennedy White House responded with a press release denying that Kennedy knew of any plans “supporting an invasion of Cuba” before the election. Dulles, by that time retired, confirmed that Kennedy had not known about the invasion (Helgerson and Center for the Study of Intelligence 1996, 51-52).

Preparing for a “Transfer” of Power: November 1960-January 1961

Kennedy won the November election by a paper-thin margin. Shortly thereafter, the official transition began as both the outgoing Eisenhower and incoming Kennedy administration prepared for a transfer of power. The roots of many challenges that Kennedy later faced with the Bay of Pigs invasion can be traced to the miscommunications and information asymmetries that occurred between election and inauguration days.

Foreign policy planning had already begun over the summer when Kennedy announced the formation of a special committee headed by Paul Nitze to study defense and foreign policy. Among Nitze’s subcommittees was the Task Force for Immediate Latin American Problems. Its final report argued, “The single greatest task of American diplomacy in Latin America is to divorce the inevitable and necessary Latin American social transformation from connection with and prevent its capture by overseas Communist power politics.”¹²

Once elected, Kennedy received more extensive briefings by the CIA.¹³ Though Kennedy had greater access to information as president-elect, the information asymmetry that had existed in the campaign—between Kennedy and Eisenhower, and Kennedy and the CIA—persisted. Kennedy’s first briefing by Dulles and Bissell as president-elect occurred in Palm Beach on November 18. Eisenhower authorized the CIA director to


¹³ For the most complete account of these briefings, see Helgerson (1996, 58-60).
discuss a narrow agenda, focusing on Cuba and reconnaissance satellites. It was most likely on this day that Kennedy learned of the Guatemala project. Dulles defined the purpose of the briefing as “not to solicit the president-elect’s approval or disapproval of the program but merely to acquaint him of its existence.” According to Bissell, “Allen and I felt great pressure to inform the new president. The [Cuba] operation had acquired a considerable momentum and could not be turned off and on” (Helgerson and Center for the Study of Intelligence 1996, 58).

Bissell and Dulles told Kennedy of Eisenhower’s authorization of covert planning against Castro, ongoing political operations inside and outside Cuba, and propaganda projects. With the paramilitary operation very much in flux, Dulles and Bissell could only discuss possible forms that the plans might take. After Bissell finished his presentation, Dulles and Kennedy spoke privately, presumably about the Cuban operation. Kennedy told speechwriter and close aide Ted Sorensen that the scope of the planning “staggered” him, but with Bissell and Dulles, “Kennedy listened attentively but was obviously very careful not to say much” (Bissell, Lewis, and Pudlo 1996, 160; Sorensen 1965, 291-92). The president-elect was scheduled to receive a more detailed operational briefing about Cuba on December 16, but this meeting was delayed over five weeks and, even then, the briefing was abbreviated.

In addition to CIA briefings, Eisenhower also briefed Kennedy on Cuba during their two transition meetings, on December 6 and January 19. In advance of the first meeting, Kennedy provided an agenda suggesting three items for discussion: Berlin, the Far East, and Cuba. On December 6, Kennedy and Eisenhower met privately for almost two hours in which they talked at “considerable length of organization, of financial problems including the imbalance of payments, of Berlin, Cuba, and the Far East; of NATO, of the leading European personalities, and other matters of interest to him” (Eisenhower 1965, 603). Later that day, members of the outgoing Cabinet joined Eisenhower and Kennedy for a conference. Eisenhower began the meeting by asking Secretary of State Christian Herter to “speak on any matter that he thought should be brought up at this time.” Herter outlined the manifold foreign relations challenges facing Kennedy, but he did not discuss Cuba because he “understood that Director Allen Dulles was keeping Senator Kennedy up to date on these matters.” Indeed, both Eisenhower and his Cabinet seemed to have been under the misapprehension that Kennedy received more detailed briefings from Dulles than he actually had.

14. For various and at times contradictory accounts, see Bissell, Lewis, and Pudlo (1996, 160); Schlesinger (1965, 215-97); Nixon (1962, 351-57); Sorensen (1965, 205-06, 294-309); Eisenhower (1965, 598, 613-14); Neustadt (1980, 220-25); David (1961, 214); Mosher et al. (1987, 169).

15. Also, it bears noting that in Getting to Know the President, Helgerson demonstrates that the widely reported November 29 meeting about Cuba planning described in Schlesinger’s A Thousand Days did not actually occur (1996, 65).


17. “Memorandum for the Record from the Assistant to the President,” Wilton Persons, December 6, 1960, Eisenhower, Dwight D., Papers as President of the United States, 1953-1961 (Ann Whitman File), Presidential Transition Series, Box 1, DDEL.
On January 19, Kennedy received a final transition briefing at the White House. Per his request, the purpose of the meeting was to “talk primarily about matters of national security and the world situation, placing particular emphasis on trouble spots such as Laos and Cuba.” In the morning, Eisenhower and Kennedy met alone, discussing “the major foreign and domestic problems which were more likely to require early decisions,” emergency procedures, and authority for covert operations under the 5412 Committee (Eisenhower 1965, 617). Kennedy’s transition liaison, Clark Clifford, was present for this eleventh-hour conference. His notes reveal Eisenhower pushed strongly for Kennedy to continue what his administration had started in Guatemala. Eisenhower told Kennedy that the project was going well, and it was Kennedy’s “responsibility” to do “whatever is necessary” to follow through. Official notes of the meeting show “Senator Kennedy asked the President’s judgment as to the United States supporting the guerrilla operation in Cuba, even if this support involves the United States publicly. President Eisenhower replied yes as we cannot let the present government there go on.”

Reiterating this point, Clifford sent a memo to Kennedy five days later reminding him that “it was the policy of the government” to help the exiled Cubans “to the utmost” and that Kennedy should “continue and accelerate” that effort (Ambrose 1981, 316).

Historians and former government officials debate whether Eisenhower forced the Cuban operation upon his successor. Eisenhower did strongly encourage Kennedy to pursue the operation, yet the plan Eisenhower bequeathed to Kennedy was certainly reversible, and there is no indication that Eisenhower would have necessarily authorized it. Until his death, Eisenhower insisted that “there was no tactical or operation plan even discussed” while he was in office (Eisenhower 1965, 614). Indeed, not until Kennedy’s presidency were tactical details, such as landing sites and logistics, contemplated. Kennedy thus came into office in a difficult position. On the one hand, he had not yet received a full briefing on the emerging Cuban operation and had an incomplete understanding of its history and details. On the other hand, Kennedy had a strong mandate to carry out the covert operation that he was about to inherit. The challenges created by this circumstance set the stage for Kennedy’s difficulty managing the Bay of Pigs operation once in office.

Decision One: Authorization to Proceed with the Cuban Program—January 28, 1961

Kennedy’s closest advisors learned about the Cuban plan two days after inauguration, on January 22. CIA Director Dulles and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

18. For list of topics discussed, see “Memorandum of Subjects for Discussion at Meeting of President Eisenhower and Senator Kennedy on Thursday, January 19, 1961,” Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Papers as President of the United States, 1953-1961 (Ann Whitman File) Presidential Transition Series, Box 1, DDEL.


20. See also “The President’s Suggestions for Discussion with President-elect Kennedy,” January 16, 1961, Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Papers as President of the United States, 1953-1961 (Ann Whitman File) Presidential Transition Series, Box 1, DDEL.

(JCS) General Lyman Lemnitzer briefed the officials, including Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNaamara, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and Deputy Secretary of State Chester Bowles. On the same day, Brigadier General David Gray, chief of the Joint Subsidiary Activities Division of the JCS, presented the findings of a committee that studied “in general hypothetical terms what might be done to unseat Castro.” Without knowledge of the CIA plan, the committee conducted the study, and produced a paper, JCSM-44-61, which outlined six options and concluded that only a guerilla force with American support would work. After Gray’s presentation, Kennedy’s advisors were unhappy at his suggestion that American force was necessary (Wyden 1979, 87).

Kennedy faced his first major decision about Cuba on January 28, 1961. The president convened a meeting with the vice president, secretary of state, secretary of defense, director of the CIA, chairman of the JCS, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas Mann, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Paul Nitze, Tracey Barnes (Bissell’s assistant at CIA), and Special Assistant for National Security McGeorge Bundy. Dulles spoke first, describing the situation in Cuba. He reported that Cuba had become a “Communist-controlled state,” with growing internal resistance to Castro. According to Bundy’s memo of the meeting, Dulles told Kennedy’s new national security team:

> The United States has undertaken a number of covert measures against Castro, including propaganda, sabotage, political action, and direct assistance to anti-Castro Cubans in military training. A particularly urgent question is the use to be made of a group of such Cubans now in training in Guatemala, who cannot remain indefinitely where they are.

At Bundy’s request, McNamara and Rusk spoke next. Both raised objections to the CIA plan. Defense believed that no existing plans were sufficient to overthrow Castro; the State Department thought that any military aggression that sidestepped the OAS would prove politically detrimental throughout Latin America.

At this point, Kennedy was expected to make a decision—the CIA needed executive authorization to continue with its program. Kennedy had three options: cancellation, full authorization, or authorization with modifications. He chose to authorize the plan in full and endorse its acceleration. Though Kennedy also ordered tandem action by the Departments of Defense and State, neither department had immediate bearing on the CIA’s planning. Bundy’s memorandum of the meeting records authorization of three actions by Kennedy:

1. “A continuation and accentuation of current activities of the Central Intelligence Agency, including increased propaganda, increased political action and increased sabotage.”

22. For secondary accounts of the meetings, see Schlesinger (1965, 238); Mosher et al. (1987, 170-72); Helgerson (1996, 64); Wyden (1979, 88); Andrew (1996, 261).

23. McGeorge Bundy, “Memorandum of Discussion on Cuba” January 28, 1961, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Box 35A, JFKL.

24. McGeorge Bundy, “Memorandum to Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, Mr. Allen Dulles,” January 27, 1961, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Box 35A, JFKL.
2. Defense Department review of CIA proposals for “deployment of anti-Castro Cuban forces on Cuban territory,” with the results of the analysis “promptly reported to the President.”

3. State Department preparation of a “concrete proposal for action with other Latin American countries to isolate the Castro regime and to bring against it the judgment of the Organization of American States.”

In other words, Kennedy authorized the major features of the plan developed under Eisenhower. In doing so, he assumed ownership of the Cuba program and full responsibility for its outcome.

Kennedy’s decision to authorize and accelerate the CIA plan was a failure. At this early point in his presidency, Kennedy’s objectives were basically the same as they had been during the campaign and preinaugural transition; with the exception of the Nixon debate fiasco, neither the president nor his advisors had advocated an alternative strategy toward Cuba. Kennedy had consistently stated that “the time to save Cuba was long ago” and the more pressing problem was resisting Communist encroachment in the rest of Latin America. To do this, he needed to shift focus to the economic progress of, and cooperation with, the Organization of American States. Authorizing the CIA plan was clearly counter to this previously outlined strategy, and Kennedy had sufficient information to make a decision on this basis. Although Kennedy had not yet received detailed policy analysis, he knew enough to conclude that any CIA covert plan to overthrow Castro would undermine his overarching regional strategy. Primarily, if Kennedy believed that Cuba was a lost cause, he should have immediately canceled the CIA plan. Mounting a covert operation to overthrow Castro would only risk the sort of incident that could turn the rest of Latin America against the United States, and acting outside of the OAS would undermine the organization. Further, if Kennedy had fully marshaled the information available to him, he would have recognized the irreconcilable facts that (1) he did not want to intervene with U.S. troops, yet (2) the military thought that American military support would be necessary. With appropriate spin, the decision would have been considered part of Kennedy’s rejuvenation of American foreign policy post-Eisenhower, and Kennedy could have shown himself to be tough on communism in other ways. Of course, the president’s political capital would have taken an early hit if he reversed a policy that he had strongly advocated, albeit briefly, in the last campaign debate. Still, the setback would have been temporary and recoverable. Despite claims by Kennedy aides that the president always had “grave doubts” about the operation, there is no evidence that Kennedy considered cancellation (Sorensen 1965, 295).

Perhaps the most important reason Kennedy continued to push the program forward was because he believed Eisenhower would have done the same. This factor can be understood as the “inherited-ness” of the Cuba plan: the fact that it had originated and evolved under Eisenhower’s watch. As Kennedy remembered, and Clifford reminded him, Eisenhower’s parting message had been, “do not drop the ball on Cuba.” The outgoing president’s vastly superior knowledge of the operation—not to mention military expertise—made Kennedy extremely wary of canceling the Cuban operation. The
Cuba project had strong institutional inertia behind it at the CIA, both in the bureaucracy and because of the thousands of Cuban exiles being trained in Guatemala. Due to information asymmetries, newness, and his campaign commitments, Kennedy lacked the confidence to reverse a policy to which so much time and resources had been devoted.

Another crucial factor influencing Kennedy’s decision was the information asymmetry between the new administration and the CIA, populated by holdovers from the Eisenhower administration, which explains Kennedy’s failure to ask critical questions from the beginning (Neustadt and May 1986, 144-45). Even basic information like an overview and explanation of the plan’s history does not seem to have been requested or provided. Throughout the campaign and transition, the CIA controlled the transmission of information to Kennedy; the CIA was the only department or agency that independently briefed him about foreign policy. Thus, Dulles and Bissell could mold Kennedy’s perception of the details of the operation. The CIA controlled information so tightly that Kennedy’s advisors were not allowed to keep briefing materials; the president did not think to push back when Bissell’s team collected them at the end of every meeting. This asymmetry was made all the more powerful by the personality of Bissell: renowned for his intellect and briefing ability, Kennedy relied on him early on without considering Bissell’s bureaucratic motivations and loyalties. Asked during the campaign whether there was anyone in the CIA that he could trust, Kennedy responded: “Dick Bissell” (Neustadt 1980, 223-24). Though Kennedy took less of a liking to Dulles, the CIA director too was, in Schlesinger’s words, “legendary” for his long career in intelligence and distinguished direction of the Agency (Blight and Kornbluh 1998, 43-44). Dulles and Bissell made a strong impression, not only on Kennedy, but also on McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs William Bundy, who gained influence as Mac’s brother and someone with experience in the CIA Directorate of Intelligence.

Moreover, Kennedy could receive little countervailing counsel because of the newness of his aides, who had only just learned about the operation. This too was the result of CIA management of information and their insistence on extreme secrecy. The irony, of course, was that 10 days before the inauguration, the New York Times had published a front-page article detailing the CIA’s covert plan with nearly complete accuracy (Kennedy 1961). But even if Kennedy’s top aides had known about the plan prior to January 22, they had little collective experience with governmental decision making—let alone covert action—and would have likely deferred to career intelligence and military officers (as they later did) (Neustadt 1980, 223). The exception among Kennedy’s Cabinet was Douglas Dillon who, prior to his appointment as secretary of the treasury, served as undersecretary of state in the Eisenhower administration and thus “knew all about the Bay of Pigs” but was never asked (Thompson, Mosher, and Halle 1986, 94-95). Kennedy’s failure to involve Dillon—who later became a crucial advisor  

26. As Acting Secretary of State on at least one occasion, Dillon had prepared memoranda on plans for covert action in Cuba for President Eisenhower. See “Memorandum for the President on the Subject of Cuba,” by Acting Secretary of State Douglas Dillon, December 2, 1960, Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Papers as President, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Dulles-Herter Series, Box 13, DDEL.
and ExComm member during the Cuban Missile Crisis—stems from his unfamiliarity with his Cabinet and what sort of counsel they could offer.

Finally, in the early days of his administration, Kennedy was likely thinking about his campaign position on Cuba. Though Kennedy had advocated moderation toward Castro for most of the campaign, in late October he made headlines by strongly supporting American aid for anti-Castro Cubans. To cancel this exact effort immediately upon taking office would have appeared duplicitous and hurt Kennedy politically during his honeymoon period. Of course, cancellation and political damage control were possible in the manner described above. But there is no record that the White House even considered cancellation, let alone a political contingency plan.

**Decision Two: Modifying the Trinidad Plan—March 11, 1961**

**Development of the Trinidad Plan**

Through February 1961, CIA, the State Department, and the Department of Defense worked to carry out Kennedy’s January 28 order to proceed with the CIA’s Cuban program. The JCS prepared JCSM-57-61: “Military Evaluation of the CIA Paramilitary Plan—Cuba.” It found that initial military success was likely, but ultimate success in overthrowing Castro depended on political uprisings on the island. Overall, the evaluation concluded, “this plan has a fair chance of ultimate success and, even if it does not achieve immediately the full results desired, could contribute to the eventual overthrow of the Castro regime.” According to study leader Brigadier General Gray, “fair” meant a 30% chance of success. But when Bissell briefed the president on the report, he did not convey the skepticism of the JCS. In fact, the briefing made Gray uncomfortable, as he felt that it was disjointed and took facts out of context. At the time, however, Gray neither objected nor ensured that the estimated probability of success was correctly conveyed (Wyden 1979, 89-92). After Bissell’s briefing, Kennedy appeared openly unenthusiastic, reminding Bissell of his right to cancel the operation “right up to the end.” According to General Gray, Kennedy’s attitude diminished the intensity of the JCS review going forward.

At the White House, McGeorge Bundy tried to help the president adjudicate the debate between the State Department, and the CIA and the Department of Defense. In anticipation of Kennedy’s February 8 meeting with senior officials at the three departments, Bundy presented a memo to the president highlighting the “divergence of views” between the two camps:

> Defense and CIA now feel quite enthusiastic about the invasion from Guatemala—at worst they think the invaders would get into the mountains, and at best they think they might get a full-fledged civil war in which we could then back the anti-Castro forces openly. State Department takes a much cooler view, primarily because of its belief that the political consequences would be very grave both in the United Nations and in Latin America.  

27. McGeorge Bundy, “Memorandum for the President,” February 8, 1961, Papers of John F. Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Box 35A, JFKL.
Bundy weighed in as well, writing that advisor Dick Goodwin and he agreed that there should not be an invasion without prior diplomatic consultations with the OAS. At the meeting, discussion proceeded along the lines that Bundy predicted. Bissell delivered a report on the plan for launching troops from Guatemala, then explained the findings of the JCS study, stating that the “plan had a fair chance of success—‘success’ meaning ability to survive, hold ground, and attract growing support from Cubans.”

Secretary Rusk emphasized the adverse diplomatic impact that the Cuba operation would catalyze. Presciently, he also insisted that “U.S. policy should not be driven to drastic and irrevocable choice by the urgencies, however real, of a single battalion of men” training in Guatemala. At the end of the meeting, Kennedy urged that alternative plans for action by anti-Castro Cubans be explored and a clear diplomatic plan of action be formulated, but the only formal decision was the president’s authorization of “the encouragement of a junta and a revolutionary council.”

Through mid-February, the dispute between the State Department and CIA/Defense Department continued, with Mann and Bissell, respectively, as the strongest advocates at the staff level. Reviewing both positions, McGeorge Bundy expressed ambivalence and pessimism: “I think the gloomier parts of both papers are right. Diplomatic and public opinion are surely not ready for an invasion, but Castro’s internal strength continues to grow. The battalion’s dispersal would be a blow to U.S. prestige but we should today have a hard time at the UN if it goes in.” He hoped that a government in exile would emerge in time to be recognized prior to mounting an invasion. In his memo, Bissell laid out three courses of action against Cuba and urged a quick decision because within six months “it will become militarily infeasible to overthrow the Castro regime except through the commitment . . . of a sizeable organized military force.” The three options were intensification of political and economic pressure, complemented by continued support for minor guerilla actions; employment of the Cuban paramilitary force in an invasion that appeared Cuban in origin; and commitment of the paramilitary force in a surprise landing, followed by installation of an opposition government on Cuban soil and “either the rapid spread of the revolt or the continuation of a large scale guerilla action in terrain suited for that purpose.” Bissell advocated the latter, writing that the JCS had concluded that the plan had a “fair chance of ultimate success (that is of detonating a major and ultimately successful revolt against Castro).” Bissell’s was an optimistic characterization of the JCS study, but since he had been in charge of the report briefing, Kennedy was unaware that “fair” actually meant a thirty percent chance of success in taking the beachhead—not ultimate success. Bissell contended that American

28. McGeorge Bundy, “Memorandum of Meeting with the President on Cuba—February 8, 1961,” February 9, 1961, Papers of John F. Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Box 35A, JFKL.
involvement would be “difficult to prove,” whereas dissolution of the paramilitary force would be a major blow to American prestige.

Mann rejoined with a memo arguing that neither a paramilitary landing nor guerilla infiltrations would succeed. The landing would be operationally too difficult and result in massive loss of life, and “small scale infiltrations would not produce a psychological effect sufficient to precipitate general uprising and widespread revolt among disaffected elements of Castro’s armed forces. These conditions must be produced before the Castro Government can be overthrown by any means short of overt intervention by United States armed forces” (Gleijeses 1995). It was Bundy’s impression that, as of mid-February, Kennedy was leaning toward Mann’s position. Indeed, at a February 17 meeting, Kennedy balked when pressed to make a decision, thereby delaying the March 15 D-Day that Bissell had envisioned. Nevertheless, after that meeting, Kennedy never followed up with Mann about his ideas, and Bundy’s memos to the were never distributed to the larger Cuba planning group (Gleijeses 1995).

Kennedy’s Decision to Modify the Trinidad Plan

Intermittent discussion among Kennedy’s senior advisors continued through February and early March; meanwhile, the CIA continued training Cubans in Guatemala and began crystallizing plans (for the first time, operational “plans” in Eisenhower’s sense of the word) for a paramilitary operation against Castro’s Cuba. Bissell presented to the president a CIA paper outlining the “Proposed Operation against Cuba” at a March 11 meeting. Of the available options, the CIA considered “an assault in force preceded by a diversionary landing” the best choice. The paper described the proposed landing in full force at Trinidad as follows:

- This operation would involve an amphibious/airborne assault with concurrent (but no prior) tactical air support, to seize a beachhead contiguous to terrain suitable for guerilla operations. The provisional government would land as soon as the beachhead had been secured. If initial military operations were successful and especially if there were evidence of spreading disaffection against the Castro regime, the provisional government could be recognized and a legal basis provided for at least non-governmental logistic support.33

Dulles underlined the importance of an urgent decision to proceed: impending Soviet military assistance would make the operation impossible in a few months, and the president of Guatemala wanted the Cubans out of his country. Demobilization of the exile brigade could prove disastrous. Kennedy reluctantly agreed that it might be best to allow the exiles to go where they wanted to go: back to Cuba (Wydens 1979, 100-01). The president then refocused the meeting on how this could be accomplished with the least amount of political risk. Kennedy was concerned that the Trinidad plan was “too spectacular”—he did not want a Normandy-esque amphibious landing, but rather a

32. Ibid.
33. “Proposed Operation Against Cuba,” March 11, 1961, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Box 61A, JFKL.
“quiet,” night landing. Concerned with maintaining plausible deniability, he emphasized that the U.S. military would not participate in any operation (Schlesinger 1965, 242).

At the end of the meeting, Kennedy had to make a decision. Drawing upon the information and analysis that had been generated in the previous two months, a successful decision would have realized that the CIA plan did not meet the president’s stated objectives; rather, it risked undermining Kennedy’s diplomatic strategy toward Latin America. As an alternative, Kennedy could have cancelled the plan or delayed a decision until he was presented with better policy options. Cancellation would have necessitated management of the problem of dismantling the exile paramilitary force, but Kennedy could have ordered CIA to clean up the mess they had created. With political spin and a cover story, publicity of the demobilization, though damaging, would not have been damaging to the popular new president. Kennedy also could have stalled, waiting to receive more information before making a decision. He could have appointed one of his much-celebrated task forces to study the CIA operation independently or designated one or two top advisors as point people, responsible for delving into the details of the operation’s history and plans. Ultimately, Kennedy authorized the CIA to proceed with planning for an invasion of Cuba but requested modification of the Trinidad Plan. National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 31, composed by Bundy after the March 11 meeting, stated as follows:

The President expects to authorize US support for an appropriate number of patriotic Cubans to return to their homeland. He believes that the best possible plan, from the point of view of combined military, political and psychological consideration, had not yet been presented and new proposals are to be concerted promptly.34

Kennedy thus put a preliminary stamp of approval on the first real operational plan for the invasion of Cuba. In NSAM 31, the president directed the CIA to assemble a government in exile, while instructing the State Department to recommend to the OAS a demarche on free elections in Cuba. Finally, he commissioned a governmental White Paper on Cuba.

Kennedy’s preliminary approval of the Trinidad Plan—albeit with modifications—represented failure of the national security decision-making process. Based on information available to Kennedy, it should have been clear that the Cuba plans did not achieve the strategic and operational objectives that he had set out during the campaign and transition. Strategically, Kennedy still hoped to resist Communist encroachment in Latin America and to pursue multilateral cooperation through the OAS. He believed that public exposure of American involvement in the exiles’ invasion of Cuba would have negative political consequences that would counteract his broad goals. As a result, Kennedy outlined explicit operational guidelines for CIA planning: maintain plausible deniability of American involvement, meaning that any overt military support for the Cuban force was out of the question. He also wanted an easily executed and realistic invasion plan that ensured a high probability of operational success.

Evaluating options in terms of these objectives, Kennedy was correct to conclude that the “best possible plan . . . had not yet been presented.” Why, then, did Kennedy encourage the CIA to continue planning, and why did he assert his intention to authorize an invasion in the future? The available evidence indicates that, as in decision one, a combination of transition-related factors influenced Kennedy’s action. These were a breakdown of the new and untested national security decision-making structure (variable 1); lack of fully available information relevant to the substance and history of the crisis, and the authoritativeness and exclusivity of the CIA in transmitting that information (variable 2); newness of the Kennedy administration (variable 5); and the institutional inertia and inheritedness of the plan (variable 6). Though focus of time and resources (variable 3) and Kennedy’s campaign commitments (variable 4) helped create the context for this decision-making process, they are not immediately explanatory of the decision.

Again, in this decision-making process, inheritedness and institutional inertia played important roles. Kennedy had inherited an ongoing program from Eisenhower, and the outgoing president had told him it was “the policy of the U.S. government” and his responsibility to carry it out. This presented two barriers to cancellation: first, Kennedy lacked the confidence to disregard the advice of a two-term president and five-star general so early in his presidency, and second, the prior existence of the plan meant that Kennedy would likely be blamed for its cancellation. Since the training in Guatemala had become an open secret in press reports throughout the Americas, the disposal problem of which Dulles warned constituted a genuine concern. The presence of Cubans in Guatemalan training camps was a legacy of the Eisenhower administration; given this fact, Kennedy thought that a quiet, covert operation in Cuba could simultaneously avoid the embarrassment of dismantling the brigade while also mounting a deniable, but potentially successful, attack on Castro’s government.

The first, second, and fifth variables are interrelated: Kennedy’s lack of national security decision-making structure and the newness of his staff exacerbated the information asymmetry between the White House and the CIA. The cool confidence and expertise of the CIA filled in the gaps left by subfunctional formal and informal advice to the president in the White House. As with decision one, in March, Kennedy was still relying on Bissell as his primary source of information about the CIA operation; even when the JCS prepared a study like JCSM 57-61, Bissell presented it to the president. Assisted by the CIA’s insistence on compartmentalization of information and total secrecy, Bissell controlled the flow of information between the CIA and Kennedy’s top advisors. By March, under Dulles’s careful cultivation, the initial trust that Kennedy felt in Bissell had blossomed into a general sense of confidence in the CIA: Kennedy was known to have said, “If I need some material fast or an idea fast, CIA is the place I have to go. The State Department is four or five days to answer a simple yes or no” (Andrew 1996, 259).

Perhaps most problematic was Kennedy’s ignorance of the wall dividing the intelligence analysis and operational arms of the CIA—and the fact that the intelligence directorate was never informed of the Cuban invasion plans. There is ample evidence that the Directorate of Intelligence, headed by Robert Amory, would not have supported the

35. Ibid.
operation because available intelligence indicated that Castro continued to enjoy substantial popularity among the Cuban population Andrew 1996, 257; Blight and Kornbluh 1996, 44; (Neustadt 1993, 132; 1980, 222). Although such informational stovepiping is common at any stage of an administration, because of his newness during the transition, Kennedy was ill equipped to manage—or even take into account—bureaucratic turf fighting between the CIA, State, and the Pentagon.

Kennedy and his advisors might have asked more questions of the CIA if formal channels of oversight and policy consideration had been in place, but immediately upon taking office Kennedy began dismantling Eisenhower’s national security structure. Eisenhower had overseen the NSC for the majority of its existence, so eliminating what Kennedy saw as red tape actually amounted to eliminating nearly all of the NSC’s formal procedures. Eisenhower depended heavily on the NSC as a forum for advice and consultation; the NSC relied on the Planning Board and Operations Coordinating Board, which prepared policy for review by the NSC and followed up on policy.

Almost immediately upon taking office, Kennedy dismantled the Planning Board and the Operations Coordinating Board, in addition to the 5412 Committee in charge of covert action oversight (Daugherty 2004, 151-55; Prados 1996, 472; Ranelagh 1987, 411). The new president’s enthusiasm for dismantling the NSC structure likely came as a result of Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson’s Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery studies of national security organization. On November 15, 1960, Senator Jackson personally sent Kennedy the first “Organizing for National Security Report,” a second report followed on December 9 at Kennedy’s request. These reports strongly influenced McGeorge Bundy’s transition planning for national security organization; Bundy discussed the study with his predecessor, Gordon Gray, during the transition and began reorganizing at the Kennedy administration’s first NSC meeting. General Andrew Goodpaster, Eisenhower’s staff secretary who stayed through the first weeks of the Kennedy administration, summarized the changes in national security structure during the transition:

[Kennedy] had a task force that recommended that he disband the NSC support structure, and he did so. Another step . . . was to permit and, in fact, encourage the combination of policy and operations. As a result, activities in the White House and in the administration were more topical; they were focused on issues of current interest. There was less distinction between staff and line in the Kennedy administration, more authority and more activities were brought into the White House. Finally, with regard to day-to-day intelligence and day-to-day operations, President Kennedy did not initially join them together in a comprehensive and continuous fashion until after the Bay of Pigs. (Goodpaster 1986, 29)


Indeed, the NSC met only three times in the first three months of Kennedy’s presidency. The impact of the decision to tear down Eisenhower’s system in the first week of the administration was grave for Kennedy: the new president purposefully created an organization centered on himself but was not yet prepared to assume so much responsibility for critical questioning and judgment. Moreover, all of the formal processes of review and oversight of national security policy—especially covert operations and intelligence—were rendered ineffectual. Issues that would have necessarily come up under the Eisenhower system never surfaced under the Kennedy system because he never asked. As Bissell writes, there was a damaging “loss of information as reports worked their way through the bureaucracy” (1996, 197). Both Kennedy and his new decision-making structure were untested in the spring of 1961 and therefore ill equipped to manage an operation of the size and gravity of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Kennedy’s decision to revamp the decision-making structure at the outset of his presidency—a choice replicated in the first national security memo of nearly every administration—demonstrates the difficulty of balancing caution against the impulse toward change during the transition period.

To make matters more difficult, Kennedy’s advisors’ newness—to the president, to each other, and to the executive branch—prevented them from filling in the gaps left by a deconstructed national security apparatus. Due to late appointments, according to William Bundy, many top national security officials “met each other at the entranceway ten days before the inauguration” (Thompson et al. 1986, 80-81). They were not familiar enough with each other to collaborate as a team, but more importantly, they were not familiar with the president, and he was not familiar with them. As MacGeorge Bundy later said, “We were just freshmen, and as freshmen you don’t go in and say, ‘Dammit, Mr. President, you’re not getting the right kind of information’ ” (Bird 1998, 198). Throughout the early months of 1961, Kennedy was feeling out his advisors to see whom he could trust, and his advisors were trying to curry favor and secure his confidence. In some cases, as with Rusk, this meant high-level officials not being as assertive as they might have been given their strength of conviction against the operation. In other cases, the result was Kennedy’s dismissal of valuable advice, as with Schlesinger, who repeatedly and insightfully warned the president of the disadvantages of the Cuban operation.

Finally, Kennedy’s appointed advisors were largely ignorant of the organization and bureaucratic dynamics of government. When, for example, Kennedy asked the JCS to review the CIA plan, he and his aides did not realize that the JCS would not treat it with the same thoroughness they would a military plan developed by the Department of Defense. Consequently, the JCS conducted their review with far less rigor than Kennedy expected.

Decision Three: Approving Operation ZAPATA—March 16, 1961

In an attempt to find Kennedy’s “best possible plan,” the CIA paramilitary staff suggested three alternative sites to General Gray’s review committee on March 14. Among these options was Cochinlos Bay, or the “Bay of Pigs.” Upon examination of the
options, Gray’s committee and the JCS recommended the Bay of Pigs as the most feasible location given Kennedy’s constraints: it had a landing strip for B-26 aircrafts (World War II-era aircraft that were to be used to make the operation look plausibly Cuban in origin) and limited access roads, which would help the Cuban brigade secure the beachhead. Still, the evaluation pointed out that “inaccessibility of the area may limit the support anticipated from the Cuban populace.”  

In fact, the JCS still thought that Trinidad, the original landing spot, was preferable, but McNamara never conveyed their preference to Kennedy (Wyden 1979, 102).

Returning to the White House on March 16, Bissell presented the new plan, Operation ZAPATA. The “Revised Cuban Operation” was designed to satisfy the president’s four political requirements: an unspectacular landing, a base for tactical air operations, a slower tempo for the invasion, and guerilla warfare alternatives.  

Of all the locations surveyed, the Bay of Pigs was the only area that had favorable geography “at the head of a well protected deep water estuary . . . surrounded by swamps impenetrable to infantry . . . except along two narrow and easily defended approaches.” The operation would begin with a night landing, and proceed by movement of tactical aircraft from an airbase in Nicaragua onto the beachhead, where they would take off to attack the Cuban Air Force. Once the Cuban Air Force had been neutralized, supply ships would discharge supplies and equipment onto the beach. “Offensive action” would follow. Once the beachhead was secured, the provisional government would land, and the United States could give diplomatic recognition to “prepare the way for more open and extensive logistical support if this should be necessary.” The CIA paper concludes:

> It is believed that the plan here outlined goes as far as possible in the direction of minimizing the political cost without impairing its soundness and chance of success as a military operation. The alternative would appear to be the demobilization of the paramilitary force and the return of its members to the United States. It is, of course, well understood that this course of action too involves certain risks.

The impact of these changes was substantial. As Bissell admits in his memoir, the “operation became more operationally difficult, mass uprisings less likely, and it mooted the possibility of retreat into the Escambrays” (Bissell, Lewis, and Pudlo 1996, 172). Thus, the Trinidad concept of a guerilla option was falsely applied to the Bay of Pigs, though the CIA did not realize this prior to the invasion because no one planned how the brigade would melt into the mountains.

At this juncture, there were three basic preconditions that Kennedy had set—and on which the CIA, State Department, and Department of Defense had all agreed—for the invasion. There had to be first, plausible deniability of American involvement; second, support for a popular uprising against Castro; and third, a guerilla option for the brigade if the operation went awry. On March 16, with the plan in nearly final form, it should have been clear that Operation Zapata did not meet these prerequisites. As early as

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38. JCSM 166-61, “Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense,” March 15, 1961, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Box 61A, JFKL.

October 1960, a Guatemalan newspaper published the story that the CIA was training counterrevolutionaries for action against Cuba; since then, papers across Latin America and even the *New York Times* had reported on American training of Cuban exiles. Yet somehow this fact failed to register with Kennedy, his top advisors, or the CIA. The idea that there would be a popular uprising—a premise upon which planners had always based the operation—was also dubious. A March 10 CIA “Memorandum for the Director” stated that Castro’s regime was unpopular but stable; the State Department concurred in this view.\(^{40}\) Furthermore, even if the Cuban population had wanted to fight alongside the Brigade against Castro, support would have been difficult to leverage because the Bay of Pigs was far from population centers. Finally and perhaps most damningly, the Bay of Pigs plan, unlike Operation Trinidad, did not allow for a guerilla option because it was 80 miles from the Escambray Mountains. This conclusion would have been obvious from consulting a map. The CIA’s confidence in the landing’s success was so great, however, that no one drew up a plan for retreat into the mountains. As Bissell wrote, “if we had, it would have been obvious that there was no easy way to escape to the Escambray from the Bay of Pigs” (1996, 172).

Nevertheless, Kennedy decided to “go ahead with the Zapata planning,” reserving the right to cancel up to 24 hours before D-Day.\(^{41}\) Of all the decisions analyzed in this article, this is the most egregious failure of the decision-making process. Kennedy should not have authorized the operation because, as described above, readily available information indicated that it did not meet the objectives Kennedy had outlined previously. If Kennedy had exploited information and resources to advance his objectives, he would never have authorized such a plan.

Each of the six variables in the analytical framework provides a partial explanation for Kennedy’s decision. Without a functional national security structure, there was no forum for formal, interdepartmental review of the new plan. No one questioned the CIA about plausible deniability, the guerilla option, or levels of popular support. No one asked for a new estimation of the odds of success. The JCS did not have adequate opportunity to voice their persistent preference for the Trinidad landing site over the Bay of Pigs. Instead, in meetings dominated by the CIA, “a curious atmosphere of assumed consensus” reigned (Schlesinger 1965, 250).

As before, the asymmetry between information possessed by the CIA and information available to other parties persisted. By this time, Dulles and especially Bissell were so emotionally invested in the Cuban plan that they lost any ability to brief the president objectively. Bissell admits, “The Agency was so committed to the Cuban invasion plan and so sure of it at this juncture that Dulles and I were edged into the role of advocates” (Bissell, Lewis, and Pudlo 1996, 157).\(^{42}\) Meanwhile, Kennedy remained deferential to

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41. “Memorandum for Record-Summary of White House Meetings,” May 9, 1961, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Box 61A, JFKL.
42. There is also a lingering question about how much the president knew about the CIA’s concurrent plot to assassinate Castro. The CIA had been trying to dispose of Fidel for over a year, partnering with the mafia to arrange for an assassination. Though they could not have been too confident, it seems that CIA
military and CIA experts—when they said that the new plan would work, he believed them. Reflecting on the Bay of Pigs with Sorensen postfacto, Kennedy scolded himself: “If someone comes in to tell me this or that about the minimum wage bill, I have no hesitation in overruling them. But you always assume that the military and intelligence people have some secret skill not available to ordinary mortals” (Schlesinger 1965, 258).

Finally, and crucially, Kennedy’s decision-making process was affected by a factor not yet discussed: distraction. While transitioning to power, Kennedy and his staff were unable to focus time and resources on Cuba because they were being pulled in countless different directions. Because of their newness, they had to educate themselves about important issues and policies as well as the requirements of their new jobs. Cuba was one of many global crises under way in the first months of 1961, including a balance of payments crisis, rising tension with the Soviet Union over Berlin, Communist encroachment in Laos, chaos in the Congo, and the Algerian War of Independence. Consequently, until the invasion, Kennedy’s staff had not allotted more than 45 minutes to Cuba on any given day (Andrew 1996, 260; Schlesinger 1965, 211). Kennedy would have been helped by more staff expertise on Cuba at each moment of decision, but by mid-March the lack of focus on Cuba had become critical—a fact lost on Kennedy and his inexperienced team. Few of his loyal staff—with the notable exception of Arthur Schlesinger—had spent enough time on Cuba to argue forcefully for or against the plan. Even Robert McNamara was too busy “trying to seize control of the Pentagon” to delve into details about Cuba; he, like so many other top advisors, simply accepted the judgment of the JCS (Schlesinger 1965, 250).

Plans did not change very much between March 16 and D-Day a month later. In practice, the operation did not benefit from a guerilla option, popular support, or plausible deniability. It was an ill-fated adventure that ended in tragedy days after it began. Fidel Castro emerged stronger and finally, at the end of 1961, openly declared himself a lifelong Communist.

Conclusion

While the best lens of analysis for the Bay of Pigs is the 1960-1961 presidential transition, it was not the only determinant of Kennedy’s decision-making failure. Each of the explanations described above—unfamiliarity, secrecy, decision-making structures, and perverse bureaucratic dynamics—provides important insight into what went wrong in the early days of Kennedy’s presidency. Nevertheless, the challenges of the transition underlie all four variables and shaped the detrimental impact of each. The transition-centric analysis offered here is thus not simply a competing causal explanation; rather, it should complement and illuminate any account of the decision-making process that culminated in the Bay of Pigs invasion. Of course, there were also factors at play in planners were wishing for a successful attempt before D-Day. In his memoir, Bissell admits: “No doubt as I moved forward with plans for the brigade, I hoped the Mafia would achieve success [in assassinating Castro]” (1996, 157).
Kennedy’s decision making that existed apart from the transition. Kennedy’s personal background and biases, his advisors and their personalities, and the broader geopolitical context of the cold war are but three examples of variables separate from the transition, which persisted throughout the administration. Even specific decision-making dynamics—such as the president’s collegial style—recurred later in Kennedy’s presidency.

Since 1961, there has not been another foreign policy catastrophe during the presidential transition period on par with the Bay of Pigs invasion. Yet there have been other suboptimal foreign policy outcomes due to transition failures—President Jimmy Carter learned of secret American payments to Jordan from the Washington Post instead of President Gerald Ford or the CIA (Mosher et al. 1987, 77); in 1981, knowledge of Israel’s intent to strike the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq was lost in the transition from Carter to Ronald Reagan (Tyler 2009, 253); and in February 2001, President Bush and his senior advisors were blindsided by the scope of Bill Clinton’s holdover airstrikes on Iraqi radar stations, which came amidst George W. Bush’s first international visit (Knights 2005, 256-38; Woodward 2006, 22). Consequently, careful study of Kennedy’s mistakes regarding Cuba suggests much-needed guidance for future presidents. The recommendations that follow draw lessons from each of the factors that this article identifies as determinants of success or failure in transition-period decision making.

First, decision-making structures are necessary at the outset of each presidential administration to impose discipline and rigor on the policy-making process. The machinery of foreign policy making is too complex for any incoming president and staff to manage in an informal way. Of course, as time passes, a president must develop decision-making styles and structures that work for him, but to abolish formal structures during the transition is a mistake. When presidents and appointees are still unfamiliar with tools for information gathering, policy planning, and policy coordination, structured processes ensure that policy makers dot the most pressing “i’s” and cross the most important “t’s.” While Kennedy never returned to the robust organizational structure of the Eisenhower NSC, after the Bay of Pigs, the NSC structure adapted to function effectively within the confines of Kennedy’s preference for informality (Daalder and Destler 2009, 23-34). As has been frequently suggested, Kennedy’s successful handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 demonstrates the lessons learned from the Bay of Pigs.

Second, procedures for information sharing between presidential administrations should be codified to eliminate the potential for manipulating or withholding information due to bureaucratic or political interests. As the 1960-1961 transition demonstrates, ulterior motives can distort transmission of information if left to the whim of individuals with vested interests—like Allen Dulles and Richard Bissell. To address this danger, every department within the Executive Office of the President should be required to provide reports on essential ongoing issues and policies, ideally to be delivered soon after the election and no later than January 1. Additionally, the CIA should establish firm protocols and guidelines for intelligence briefings during presidential transitions. These should be developed roughly along the lines set out by former CIA Inspector-General John Helgerson (1996, x, 1-4). In particular, such guidelines should address the number of briefings; the specialization and rank of official that the CIA uses to brief candidates
and presidents-elect; political considerations, to ensure a new president works well with
the intelligence community; the substance of intelligence provided to candidates and
presidents-elect; and disclosure of ongoing covert programs.

Third, incoming administrations should leverage experts and stakeholders to maxi-
mize time and resources during the transition period in five ways:

a. Extract as much expertise from the outgoing administration as possible. To do so, an
incoming administration should designate a transition team representative charged with
ensuring as much coordination between administrations as possible, much as Kennedy
did with Clark Clifford. All appointees who have been named before January 20 should
meet with their predecessors. Reports and briefings on important or challenging issues
should be requested. Policy makers in the outgoing administration should be required
by law to update and share contingency plans for emergencies that could occur in the
eyear 2021 days of an administration. Barack Obama’s transition team’s practice of embedding
working groups within executive branch departments less than a month after the
election should be a model for future presidents-elect to emulate and improve upon.

b. Reverse delays in the Senate confirmation process. Stalling in the Senate causes agencies
to lack needed senior management during the crucial first year of an administration.
This problem begins at the outset of the administration (Obama had 17% of his
nominees confirmed in the first 100 days, compared with Bush’s 10% and Clinton’s
15%) and continues for years (18 months into his administration, only 78% of Obama’s
nominees have been confirmed) (Light 2010).

c. Use the transition period to generate intellectual capital. To the greatest extent possible
given information availability and sensitivity, transition teams—which include both
campaign staff and potential administration officials—should conduct policy planning.
At the very least, guiding strategic objectives should be in place by inauguration
(though, of course, subject to modification given new information). Kennedy’s extensive
use of task forces during the campaign and transition is a good model in this regard.

d. Consider bringing in external consultants in the early days of the administration.
Though business consulting firms have sometimes worked for the government, elder
statesmen, academics, or veteran government officials with security clearances can also
provide valuable, specific expertise.

e. Take advantage of the bureaucracy. The career services have a wealth of experience and
expertise, but new administrations often ignore them. Good relations should be estab-
lished with career foreign policy officials at the outset of an administration.

While Kennedy’s case demonstrates that even good advice can be ignored, transition-
period policy planning is crucial to determine strategic objectives at the outset of an
administration.

Fourth, while on the campaign trail, temper policy commitments. While some
degree of hyperbole is necessary in an electoral contest, candidates should keep in mind
that, if elected, they can be held accountable for their statements. Of course, caution does
not necessarily preclude commitments to broad objectives; rather, candidates should
avoid locking themselves into specific policies before they know all the relevant facts.
Even seemingly minor campaign statements, like Goodwin’s press release about support-

43. For up-to-date tracking of Obama’s appointments, see Washington Post, “Head Count: Tracking
15, 2010).
ing Cuban guerillas, can have major ramifications. Perhaps more importantly, though, presidents-elect should realize that a political setback at the outset of their administration is not fatal, and it is better to risk political embarrassment than to risk people’s lives with poorly conceived foreign policy.

Fifth, counteract the detrimental effects of “newness” by preparing presidential staff to immediately assume responsibility. The staff member closest to the president (the chief of staff or, with foreign affairs, the national security advisor) should define the president’s standard operating procedures to the group. These guidelines should answer questions like the following: Does the president like to be challenged in group meetings, or would he prefer that staff voice opposition in private? Should staff debate policy in front of the president, or come to him with previously established conclusions? How long should memos and background readings be? If, like McGeorge Bundy, the national security advisor does not know the president well enough to answer these questions, he or she should seek guidance from the president-elect or campaign staff. Additionally, transition teams should brief the White House staff and Cabinet on executive branch organizational dynamics, common challenges, as well as the tools available to them in policy making. These informal practices would complement the first NSC memo, which traditionally outlines the formal organization of the new president’s national security structure.

Sixth, both incoming and outgoing administrations should be sensitive to the challenges of institutional inertia and “inheritedness.” For its part, an outgoing administration can act responsibly in anticipation of a power turnover. It is common for lame-duck presidents to attempt last-ditch resolutions to long-standing issues (Cuba was one such issue for Eisenhower; the Middle East peace process is a frequent contemporary example), but they must be sensitive to the danger of precipitating a crisis on the eve of a transition or locking their successor into a given policy. On the other side, an incoming administration should be wary of both continuity and change in national security policy; both aims should result from careful evaluation of the alternatives. New administrations should be willing to miss some perceived opportunities in the early days of their administration to avoid big and irreversible mistakes. Ongoing covert operations represent a particular challenge because many of the difficulties of successful policy-making are exacerbated. President Obama’s decision to maintain the key people overseeing the Predator drones program in Pakistan during the 2008-2009 transition is a recent example of effective management of a covert program during the transition (Mayer 2009). More scholarship is needed to understand the history of covert operations during presidential transitions and to analyze which arrangements have been successful in the past.

If policy makers are not mindful of the mistakes made during past transitions, they are doomed to repeat them. The resounding lesson of the Bay of Pigs fiasco is the necessity of effective information transmission—through formal and informal channels—between administrations. According to participants, the 2008-2009 transition featured exemplary cooperation on national security issues between the incoming and outgoing administrations (Kumar 2009). While this is certainly a positive development, and reflects knowledge and integration of lessons learned from past transitions, implementing best practices must be a requirement rather than a choice.
Especially in the case of foreign policy, a smooth handover of leadership requires that the incoming president be prepared to govern before he is inaugurated. Absent such preparations, the consequences could be dire. Indeed, the transition is a moment of acute vulnerability for the United States. President Eisenhower put it best when he wrote:

A Presidential inauguration could be a moment of practical dead center for the federal government mechanism. Further, an emergency, arising at home or abroad during the first twenty-four hours after a new President takes his oath of office, would demand decisions and actions which by reason of the unfamiliarity of new officials with their duties and authority, might result in bewilderment and lack of intelligent reaction, with resultant damage to the United States (Eisenhower 1965, 617-18).

In a political system that requires a transfer of power every eight years, it is imperative that the U.S. government institutionalize all measures necessary to ensure national security continuity.

References


