
CHAPTER 2

INTO POLITICS WITH KENNEDY AND JOHNSON

The CIA's early relationship with presidential candidate John Kennedy could hardly have been more different from the one it had established eight years earlier with General Eisenhower. In 1952, the Agency's briefings in the preelection period had been undertaken by working-level officers who, for the most part, delivered current intelligence summaries in written form. With few exceptions, the reports and analyses offered by the briefers steered clear of policy issues. In 1960, by contrast, the briefings were handled personally by DCI Allen Dulles and included extended discussions of sensitive matters.

In 1960, the CIA and its programs for the first time became involved in the political campaign, sometimes within public view and sometimes behind the scenes. Issues arose relating to the need for, and the protection of, US intelligence capabilities, specific intelligence collection programs such as the U-2 aircraft overflights, and substantive analytic findings related to Soviet economic and strategic capabilities. Charges were made regarding the allegedly selective use of intelligence information by the White House and the Agency. And, for the first time, CIA faced the question of what obligation it might have to brief a presidential candidate on a major covert action program.

The Presidential Debates

Many of these issues were on display during the presidential debates, held for the first time in 1960. The first debate, in Chicago on

26 September, focused exclusively on domestic issues, but in the second debate, on 7 October in Washington, Republican candidate Richard Nixon attacked Senator Kennedy's earlier statement that the United States should have apologized to the Soviets for the incident in which Francis Gary Powers's U-2 aircraft was downed over the USSR during a CIA reconnaissance mission. "We all remember Pearl Harbor," the vice president began. "We lost 3,000 American lives. We cannot afford an intelligence gap. And I just want to make my position absolutely clear with regard to getting intelligence information. I don't intend to see to it that the United States is ever in a position where, while we are negotiating with the Soviet Union, that we discontinue our intelligence effort, and I don't intend ever to express regrets to Mr. Khrushchev or anybody else."¹

In the third debate on 13 October, featuring Kennedy from New York and Nixon from Los Angeles, Kennedy cited the DCI as his authority for an invidious comparison of US and Soviet achievements: "The economic growth of the Soviet Union is greater than ours. Mr. Dulles has suggested it is from two to three times as great as ours."² In that debate and in the fourth and final encounter in New York on 21 October, Kennedy pursued the theme that the Soviets were surpassing the United States economically and militarily, a topic that headed the list of CIA intelligence production priorities.

Perhaps the most crucial foreign policy issue raised in the 1960 debates, which derived directly from US intelligence analyses, was the alleged gap between US and Soviet intercontinental missile production. Kennedy charged that the Soviets had "made a breakthrough in missiles, and by '61-2-3 they will be outnumbering us in missiles. I'm not as confident as he [Nixon] is that we will be the strongest military power by 1963." Kennedy added, "I believe the Soviet Union is first in outer space. We have made more shots but the size of their rocket thrust and all the rest. You yourself said to Khrushchev, you may be ahead of us in rocket thrust but we're ahead of you in color television, in your famous discussion in the kitchen. I think that color television is not as important as rocket thrust."³

1. *New York Times*, 8 October 1960, 10.

2. *New York Times*, 14 October 1960, 21.

3. *New York Times*, 22 October 1960, 8, 9.

During three of the debates, Nixon attacked Kennedy for his lack of willingness to defend Quemoy and Matsu, the small Chinese Nationalist-held islands off the coast of Communist China. The extensive discussion of the Quemoy-Matsu issue did not create any direct problem for the CIA, but it led directly to a controversial dispute between the candidates over policy toward Cuba, where a popular revolution had established a Soviet-supported communist government. The politically charged clash had a number of repercussions in the White House and at the CIA.

Kennedy adviser Arthur Schlesinger Jr. later described the relationship of these China and Cuba issues and the sequence of events in his memoir of the Kennedy administration, *A Thousand Days*: “The Kennedy staff, seeking to take the offensive after his supposed soft position on Quemoy and Matsu, put out the provocative statement about strengthening the Cuban fighters for freedom.”⁴ The controversial press release, crafted late one evening in the Biltmore Hotel in New York City by speechwriter Richard Goodwin, said, “We must attempt to strengthen the non-Batista, democratic, anti-Castro forces in exile, and in Cuba itself, who offer eventual hope of overthrowing Castro.” According to Goodwin, the policy statement was not shown to the sleeping Kennedy because of the late hour; it was the only public statement of the campaign not approved by the candidate.⁵

The ill-considered statement on Cuba received wide press play and was immediately attacked. The *New York Times* the next day ran the story as the lead item on the front page with the headline: “Kennedy Asks Aid for Cuban Rebels to Defeat Castro, Urges Support of Exiles and Fighters for Freedom.” James Reston wrote in the *Times* that Kennedy had made “what is probably his worst blunder of the campaign.”⁶

Coming the day before the fourth presidential debate, the statement from the Kennedy camp put Nixon in what he found to be an extraordinarily awkward position. Many years later Nixon wrote in his memoirs, “I knew that Kennedy had received a CIA briefing on the administration’s Cuba policy and assumed that he knew, as I did, that a plan to aid the Cuban exiles was already under way on a top secret

4. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 225.

5. Richard Goodwin, *Remembering America* (Little, Brown and Co., 1988), 125.

6. *New York Times*, 23 October 1960, E10.

basis. His statement jeopardized the project, which could succeed only if it were supported and implemented secretly.”⁷

Throughout the campaign the two candidates had engaged in a spirited exchange about whether the Eisenhower administration had “lost” Cuba, and Nixon knew that the issue would be revived in the final debate, which was to be devoted solely to foreign affairs. Nixon has written that to protect the security of the planned operation he “had no choice but to take a completely opposite stand and attack Kennedy’s advocacy of open intervention.” And he did attack, saying, “I think that Senator Kennedy’s policies and recommendations for the handling of the Castro regime are probably the most dangerously irresponsible recommendations that he has made during the course of this campaign.”⁸

Former Kennedy advisers have underscored over the years that the statement on Cuba was released without Kennedy’s knowledge by staffers ignorant of the covert action planning under way at the time and was crafted solely to ensure that Kennedy would not again be put on the defensive about communist expansionism. These same advisers differ among themselves, however, on the key question of whether Kennedy himself knew of the covert action plans. Kennedy speechwriter Theodore Sorensen said in 1993, “I am certain that at the time of the debates Kennedy had no knowledge of the planned operation. His reference to more assertive action regarding Cuba was put in by one of my assistants to give him something to say.”⁹

The assistant was Richard Goodwin, whose memory is quite different. He asserts that as a presidential candidate, Kennedy “had received secret briefings by the CIA, some of which revealed that we were training a force of Cuban exiles for a possible invasion of the Cuban mainland.”¹⁰ Goodwin and Sorensen have both made clear that they were not in attendance at any CIA briefings.

The US government’s planning for a covert action program intended to undermine Castro had been approved by President Eisenhower

7. Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), 220.

8. *New York Times*, 22 October 1960, 9.

9. Theodore Sorensen, telephone interview with the author, 19 May 1993. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Sorensen’s comments come from this interview.

10. Goodwin, *Remembering America*, 125.

in March 1960 and was in progress throughout the period of the presidential campaign. The question of when and to what extent Kennedy—or any presidential candidate— would be informed of the covert action deliberations was important to CIA because it raised the delicate question of informing individuals outside the normally restricted circle in CIA, the Congress, and the executive branch.

In 1960 this was uncharted territory. In subsequent presidential campaign years, the Agency's practice came to be one of delaying briefings even on established covert action programs, as well as on sensitive technical and human-source collection programs, until after the election had determined who would be president. This meant denying such briefings to presidential candidates, creating the risk that they would inadvertently make statements during the campaign that might embarrass themselves and the Agency, or—more important—complicate the future execution of US foreign policy.

Well before the Cuba liberation issue came to a head in October, the outgoing Eisenhower administration had realized that covert action planning on Cuba could be a political bombshell. Following one of Allen Dulles's briefings of the National Security Council in early August, for example, the vice president pulled the DCI aside to ask him whether Kennedy and his running mate, Senator Lyndon Johnson, were being provided information on covert action projects, specifically those related to Cuba. Dulles gave a carefully crafted answer to the effect that Kennedy was being told a little but not too much. According to former Agency officials familiar with the exchange, Nixon reacted strongly to Dulles's reply, saying, "Don't tell him anything. That could be dangerous."¹¹

In his own account of these events, published in 1962, Nixon charged that Kennedy, before the election of 1960, had knowledge of covert action planning "for the eventual purpose of supporting an invasion of Cuba itself."¹² This charge prompted a formal press release from the White House on 20 March 1962 denying that Kennedy had been told of any plans for "supporting an invasion of Cuba" before the election. The White House denial was backed up by Dulles, by then a former DCI, who explained that Nixon's comments were apparently

11. Knight McMahan, interview with the author in Hanover, New Hampshire, 18 April 1993.

12. Richard Nixon, *Six Crises* (Doubleday and Co., 1962), 354.



Sen. John F. Kennedy and DCI Allen Dulles prepare to meet the press.

based on a misunderstanding of what was included in the briefings he had given Kennedy.

Preelection Briefings: What Really Was Discussed?

As early as 30 March 1960, Edward P. Morgan of the American Broadcasting Company used the occasion of a presidential press conference to ask Eisenhower if the presidential nominees to be selected in the summer would be given high-level intelligence briefings. At that early date the DCI had not yet raised the subject with the president, but Eisenhower did not hesitate, saying “We always do that. They did it for me in 1952 and I did it in ‘56, as quick as the nominees are named they begin to get it.”¹³ Indeed, on 18 July, Eisenhower sent telegrams to the Democratic nominees offering them briefings by the CIA. Un-

13. Dwight Eisenhower, in comments recorded by Allen Dulles, memorandum for the president, 9 July 1960.

doubtedly recalling his own difficult exchange with President Truman eight years earlier, Eisenhower included in his telegram a paragraph saying, "Because of the secret character of the information that would be furnished you, it would be exclusively for your personal knowledge. Otherwise, however, the receipt of such information would impose no restriction on full and free discussion."¹⁴

Senator John F. Kennedy, the Democratic presidential nominee, immediately accepted the offer, and the first intelligence briefing was held five days later, on Saturday, 23 July. The briefing was conducted at Kennedy's vacation home in Hyannisport, Massachusetts, by the DCI alone in a session that lasted approximately two and a quarter hours. Dulles then briefed Senator Lyndon Johnson, the vice-presidential nominee, at his ranch in Texas on 28 July.

In that first round of briefings, the DCI put heavy emphasis on Soviet issues, including Soviet progress in strategic delivery capabilities, missiles, and bombers, and discussed the nuclear testing issue. He also reviewed Soviet statements on Berlin and Sino-Soviet cooperation. Dulles went over the latest intelligence on the situation in the Taiwan Strait; Middle East politics, particularly events in Iran; France's anticolonial problems in Algeria and Belgium's in the Congo; and Cuba. The Johnson briefing differed from that of Kennedy only because the Texas senator was also interested in discussing Mexico.¹⁵

Dulles recorded that both wanted to know what developments might arise during the campaign, especially in Berlin, Cuba, and the Congo. Kennedy asked Dulles's opinion about the likelihood of an early Chinese attack on the offshore islands in the Taiwan Strait and inquired about the status of the conference on limiting nuclear testing. Johnson, in addition to his interest in Mexican and Caribbean matters, asked about Soviet missile developments, reflecting his position as chairman of the Senate Preparedness Committee.

At the conclusion of the first briefing, Kennedy stated that in future briefings he wanted the DCI to cover potential trouble spots all around the world, but subsequent scheduling difficulties delayed the next (and, as it turned out, the last) preelection briefing session almost

14. Dwight Eisenhower telegrams to John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, *Public Papers of the Presidents*, 1960, 582.

15. Allen Dulles, memorandum for the president, 3 August 1960.

two months. On 17 September, a Saturday night, Dulles was dining with friends in Georgetown when he was surprised by a telephone call from a member of the Kennedy staff at about 9 p.m. Could the DCI meet with the senator on Monday morning, 19 September, at the Kennedy home in Georgetown?¹⁶

When the DCI arrived with his hastily prepared briefing package, he found Kennedy engaged in discussion with Senator Albert Gore Sr. while various other people, including Prince Sadruddin Khan, uncle of the Aga Khan, waited their turns. When the other visitors had departed, the DCI had approximately 30 minutes with Kennedy to give him an update on world trouble spots. Dulles's memorandum for the record notes that he discussed Cuba, the Congo, Berlin, Laos, Jordan, Syria, the Sino-Soviet dispute, and the Soviet space program.

During this second briefing Kennedy was interested in learning what Khrushchev's objectives would be in his coming visit to the UN and what the Agency believed the Soviet leader was likely to say or do. The senator said he wanted to be alerted to any critical areas that CIA thought might blow up over the next six or seven weeks before the election, but Dulles apparently took no specific action at the time to meet this request.

More than a month later, with the election looming, Robert Kennedy contacted Acting DCI Gen. Charles Cabell to repeat the request for information on possible trouble spots. This brought a response within 24 hours. On 2 November, Cabell traveled to California, where Kennedy was campaigning, to deliver a memorandum that discussed a number of potentially troublesome developments. These included the Soviets' October Revolution anniversary, Sino-Soviet developments, tensions in Berlin and the Taiwan Straits, possible Chinese nuclear tests, a Soviet space spectacular, the French-Algerian impasse, events in Southeast Asia, King Hussein's delicate position in the Middle East, the unsettled situation in the Congo, and possible action by Cuba against Guantanamo Naval Base. In this review of explosive international situations, the Agency cautioned that, in fact, "we do not estimate any of them are likely to occur prior to 8 November."¹⁷

16. Allen Dulles, memorandum for the record, 21 September 1960.

17. CIA, untitled list of significant developments in response to Kennedy's request; no date.

A search of CIA records has failed to confirm that Dulles briefed Kennedy on the status of Cuban covert action planning in either of their two sessions held before the election in 1960. The DCI's memorandums recording the sessions in July and September mention Cuba only as one of many trouble spots around the world. Taken alone, this would suggest that their discussion concerned what was going on in Cuba rather than what the United States might be planning to do about it.

An internal CIA memorandum of 15 November 1960 discussing an anticipated postelection briefing mentions that "the following draft material is much more detailed and operational than that prepared for the candidates in July."¹⁸ This formulation suggests that the message on Cuba Dulles conveyed in July was at least a bit "operational," even if not detailed. Such an inference would be consistent with Dulles's answer to Nixon's question in early August that he had told Kennedy, in effect, a little but not too much.

When Dulles met with Kennedy in July (their only meeting before the exchange between Dulles and Nixon in early August), the planning on Cuba and the limited operational activities already launched related almost entirely to propaganda and political action. Paramilitary planning at that point envisaged the deployment of extremely small (two or three men) guerrilla units. Contingency planning within the Agency for more forceful action intensified over the next several months, but the idea of a conventional assault by Cuban exile forces was not put before the interagency Special Group until 3 November and was rejected.

The Missile Gap

In the two preelection briefings in 1960, the most challenging issue the DCI is known to have discussed at length was that of Soviet strategic capabilities. Without intending to do so, Dulles had created a considerable political problem for himself by giving a number of public speeches in which he asserted that Soviet capabilities were growing and raised the question of what the US response ought to be. He had highlighted the USSR's progress in basic science, in training large

18. CIA, "Draft Cuban Operational Briefing: President-Elect," 15 November 1960.

numbers of scientists, and its research and development efforts as well as its demonstrated achievements in building spacecraft and missiles.

In early 1960 the United States was aware of the Soviet missile flights from the Tyuratam test site, but did not know with certainty if any operational Soviet missiles had been deployed. In the search for deployed missiles, among other priority missions, U-2 aircraft had been flown over the Soviet Union since July 1956. On 1 May 1960, Gary Powers was shot down. In the United States, the West Virginia primary election campaign was at its peak; there was no doubt that the U-2 incident would figure in the impending general election campaign.

In his formal memorandums for the record, Dulles did not provide much detail regarding exchanges he may have had with Kennedy about the U-2 shootdown. He did note that the senator, in the September briefing, had asked him about a book by Maj. Gen. John Medaris, entitled *Countdown for Decision*. The Medaris book had criticized the US government for its failure to replace the U-2 with a more sophisticated aircraft or an invulnerable satellite reconnaissance system.

In a memorandum sent to Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, the staff secretary of the White House, on 25 September, Dulles recorded that Kennedy and Johnson had separately inquired about intelligence techniques or capabilities to replace the U-2.¹⁹ Dulles was clearly uneasy about the security hazards in these questions and noted that he had replied only in a general way, indicating that research and development work on advanced aircraft and satellites were progressing “with reasonably satisfactory prospects.” Dulles added, “Unless I hear from you to the contrary, I shall not give any more detailed briefings on this subject.” In fact, the first US satellite reconnaissance system was being used in an experimental way in the late summer of 1960; it was launched in August. Significant amounts of analytically useful imagery did not become available from the new system until December 1960, after the election.

During the preelection period, Dulles was also in an awkward position owing to a minor dispute or misunderstanding between the White House and the Kennedy team about whether the senator should receive a briefing from Secretary of Defense Thomas Gates. During the preelection period, in the interest of fairness to each candidate,

19. Allen Dulles, memorandum for Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster, 25 September 1960.

Eisenhower wanted Kennedy to receive general overview briefings on the world situation from the CIA, and these were being provided. On the other hand, the president initially declined the Kennedy team's request that he receive a briefing from the secretary of defense. By the end of August, however, the White House had changed its mind and approved a briefing by Gates.

Dulles had weighed in with the White House on at least two occasions, including once with Eisenhower personally, to urge that Gates brief Kennedy. The DCI knew that he would be courting political trouble if he answered what had been Kennedy's first question: "Where do we ourselves stand in the missile race?" As he had done on innumerable occasions in congressional appearances, Dulles insisted that the Defense Department "was the competent authority on this question."

The White House was obviously uneasy that Kennedy would hear several versions of the story concerning Soviet strategic capabilities. Democrats on the Preparedness Committee, led by the uniquely well-informed Senator Stuart Symington, were attacking the White House with claims that the Soviets were outdistancing the United States. Gates had been trying to play down the importance of the issue, but the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Air Force Gen. Nathan Twining, was emphasizing the more alarmist views of the Air Force. As DCI, Dulles had been charged with pulling together a collective view of this intractable problem of collection and analysis, but everyone, including Eisenhower, knew the Agency did not have the detailed technical intelligence or the bureaucratic clout to referee the contentious issue.²⁰

In responding to Kennedy's questions about Soviet strategic capabilities, Dulles did not improvise. On this critical and technical subject he stuck very closely to the findings laid out in numerous national intelligence estimates. During the period from 1957 to 1960, the Intelligence Community published from two to four NIEs annually evaluating Soviet progress on space and ballistic missile programs. In December 1957, the Community had published one of its most ominous NIEs, referring to the Soviets' "crash program." That estimate had projected that the USSR sometime during calendar year 1959 would probably

20. Andrew Goodpaster, interview by the author in Washington, DC, 26 September 1993. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Goodpaster's observations come from this interview.

have its first operational capability with 10 prototype ICBMs.²¹ The same estimate projected that the Soviet Union probably would have “an operational capability with 100 ICBMs about one year after its first operational capability date, and with 500 ICBMs two, or at most, three years [that is, 1963] after first operational capability date.”

By early 1960, the Community as a whole was using somewhat more moderate language to discuss probable Soviet missile capabilities, but, nevertheless, early that year three separate NIEs were published whose findings were sufficiently alarmist to fuel the missile gap debate. The bottom line of an estimate published in February was especially important because it came as close as the US Intelligence Community ever did to a net assessment. It stated: “Our analysis leads us to believe that if the US military posture develops as presently planned, the USSR will in 1961 have its most favorable opportunity to gain a decided military, political, and psychological advantage over the United States by the rapid deployment of operational ICBMs.”²² The February estimate went on to observe that the Soviet ICBM program did not appear to be a crash program but was designed to provide a substantial ICBM capability at an early date. A separate NIE, also published in February, stated flatly: “The single-most-important development affecting the structure of Soviet military power during the period of this estimate will be the buildup of an ICBM force. Long-range missiles will enable the USSR to overcome its inferiority to the United States in nuclear strategic attack capability, as it was unable to do with bomber aircraft.”²³

In terms of the political debate on the issue, an even larger problem was posed by the Air Force conclusion that leaders of the Soviet Union were endeavoring to attain a decisive military superiority over the United States. This superiority, the Air Force assessed, would enable the USSR “to launch such devastating attacks against the United States that at the cost of acceptable levels of damage to themselves, the United States as a world power would cease to exist.” This extremely ominous Air Force view was repeated in several NIEs—often referred

21. Special National Intelligence Estimate No. 11-10-57, *The Soviet ICBM Program - Conclusions*, 10 December 1957, 1, 2.

22. National Intelligence Estimate No. 11-8-59, *Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Attack through Mid-1964*, 9 February 1960, 2.

23. National Intelligence Estimate No. 11-4-59, *Main Trends in Soviet Capabilities and Policies, 1959-1964*, 9 February 1960, 4.

to inaccurately as CIA products—published during the period. It was shared widely with the Congress and leaked to the press.

The findings of these Intelligence Community estimates were having a significant impact on the White House, the Congress, and the voters. In the words of Howard Stoertz, a senior CIA officer who often accompanied Dulles to his briefings of the Congress and the NSC, “Our findings were sufficiently scary that those who wanted a new administration to be elected were finding support in our Estimates.”²⁴

One interesting index of the impact of this intelligence was provided by former President (and Congressman) Gerald Ford in September 1993. Responding to an open-ended question about whether he remembered occasions when intelligence findings had created particular policy dilemmas, Ford volunteered, “Mostly I remember the period from 1953 to 1964 when I was on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee that provided the CIA’s budget. Allen Dulles and others from the CIA would come in and paint the most scary picture possible about what the Soviet Union would do to us. We were going to be second rate; the Soviets were going to be Number One. I didn’t believe all that propaganda.”²⁵

The same material that was briefed to the House had been provided to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and, therefore, to one of its most prominent junior members, John Kennedy. Kennedy made effective use of this intelligence in his presidential campaign, to the discomfort of the CIA, the White House, and Vice President Nixon—the Republican candidate. Goodpaster remembers that the politics of the issue became sufficiently awkward that Eisenhower sent him to the Agency to meet personally with Dulles and Symington to get to the bottom of the problem. Howard Stoertz remembers well that “Allen Dulles had us prepare a chart to prove we had not cooked the books for the election.”

24. Howard Stoertz, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 27 September 1993.

25. Gerald Ford, interview by the author in Beaver Creek, Colorado, 8 September 1993.

Postelection Briefing on Cuba

Once Kennedy had won the election, the CIA felt free to provide him a systematic briefing on the Agency's covert action programs worldwide, and—most important—to inform him in detail about the deliberations under way on Cuba. This took place at the Kennedy residence in Palm Beach, Florida, on 18 November, some 10 days after the vote. Reflecting the importance and sensitivity of the subject, there were two high-level briefers: Dulles, whom Kennedy had announced he would keep on as DCI the day following the election (along with FBI Director Hoover, his first appointments); and Richard Bissell, the Agency's deputy director for plans (operations). Like Dulles, Bissell knew Kennedy from the Washington social scene and, in his own case, from a shared New England background.

In discussing the briefing more than 30 years later, Bissell recalled that "Allen and I felt great pressure to inform the new president. The [Cuban] operation had acquired a considerable momentum and could not just be turned off and on. We settled outside on the terrace at a table and I gave him an abbreviated but fairly complete briefing on the state of the operation. I went on at least 30 minutes, maybe 45. I was fairly detailed in outlining the plan of what we hoped would happen."²⁶

A review of the briefing papers used by Dulles and Bissell suggests that they gave Kennedy a careful overview of the Cuba plans as they existed in mid-November 1960. Their review included an explanation of the presidential authorization, signed by Eisenhower on 17 March, for the Agency to undertake planning. The briefing described the political action initiatives already under way in which the Agency was providing support to various anti-Castro groups and individuals inside and outside Cuba. They described the propaganda operation in place at the time, including the preparation of publications and radiobroadcasts aimed at weakening Castro's rule. These included broadcasts from Swan Island, which years later came to play a prominent role in the Agency's activities against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

The briefing of 18 November occurred in the midst of a fundamental review, back in Washington, of the scope of the paramilitary aspects of the anti-Castro program. At that time, everything was in flux. Noth-

26. Richard Bissell, interview by the author in Farmington, Connecticut, 17 April 1993.

ing had been decided, let alone finally approved. In these circumstances, Dulles and Bissell planned to brief Kennedy carefully on a range of possible paramilitary operations.

The first option envisaged the development and support of dissident groups by the Agency's Cuban assets to undertake antiregime guerrilla action inside Cuba. A group of instructors had been trained who would, in time, oversee the instruction of up to 500 additional men, and radio and flight training were being provided Cuban pilots. The two briefers were to describe all these preparations, as well as the role of a few small groups already placed inside Cuba and the airdrops of supplies and equipment that were sustaining them.

The potential second phase of the paramilitary plan to be covered by the briefers was a combined sea-air assault by trained Cuban exiles coordinated with the guerrilla activity generated on the island. This undertaking would attempt to establish a close-in staging base for future anti-Castro military operations. A last phase, should it be needed, would be an air assault on the Havana area in support of guerrilla forces in Cuba moving on the ground into the capital. Mention was to be made of a contingency plan for overt US military intervention that would include the use of Agency assets.

Bissell remembers emphasizing particularly the plans for the possible movement of exile ground and air forces to Cuba both by sea and by air. He recalls that he "put a lot of emphasis on the timing aspects, and the numbers [of men and equipment] involved." Dulles and Bissell intended to inform Kennedy that it did not appear that in-country guerrilla actions alone would be successful in sparking a successful revolt against the regime. It is unclear whether they intended to brief the president-elect on the even more pessimistic assessment expressed by some in the Agency that even an invading force of exile Cubans would be unsuccessful without direct US involvement.

Press accounts of the briefing of Kennedy in Palm Beach indicate that it went on for two hours and 40 minutes. Bissell remembers that throughout the extended session the president-elect "was almost entirely a listener—although a very good listener. Kennedy had a number of questions that grew out of the briefing, but he had no prepared list of questions ahead of time."

Available CIA records do not suggest that Kennedy volunteered any opinion regarding the wisdom, or lack thereof, of the plans presented to him. Nothing in the documentation suggests that he either authorized the operation or urged restraint. To the contrary, Dulles stated in a memorandum sent to Gen. Maxwell Taylor, the president's special adviser on military affairs, on 1 June 1961 that "the purpose of the briefing was not to solicit the president-elect's approval or disapproval of the program but merely to acquaint him of its existence."²⁷ This implies, obviously, that Dulles had not previously informed Kennedy of the plans.

As Bissell put it, "We were in an absolutely untenable position until the new president knew what was going on, but we avoided seeking a yea or nay." He added that "Kennedy was favorably interested, but extremely careful to avoid a commitment, express or implied. We didn't get any negative reaction—I was interested above all in his studious neutrality. Allen Dulles and I talked about the Kennedy reaction after the fact. We had the same impression—on the whole Kennedy's attitude was favorable." This shared impression obviously cleared the way for continued Agency planning for what ultimately became the Bay of Pigs operation.

Other Covert Programs

Dulles intended to have the briefing of the president-elect in Palm Beach cover worldwide intelligence operations, of which Cuba was only one. His records indicate he wanted to establish that the Agency was fully supportive of the new president. "We made it clear to him that from this time on any information he desired was at his immediate disposal and would be willingly given."²⁸ In fact, Dulles was also working hard to solidify his personal standing with Kennedy. Senior Agency officers undoubtedly had mixed feelings when Dulles announced at a special staff meeting on 10 November that "all liaison with the new Administration by CIA would be conducted by the Director."²⁹

27. Allen Dulles, memorandum for Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, 1 June 1961.

28. Allen Dulles, *My Answer on the Bay of Pigs*, unpublished draft, October 1965.

29. Lyman Kirkpatrick, *Diary*, 10 November 1960.

According to handwritten notes prepared by Bissell, he and Dulles also were prepared to brief Kennedy on a variety of issues, large and small.³⁰ For example, one planned topic was the question of clearances. Although the president would be told that he possessed all clearances automatically, he should be advised of what was involved in providing special compartmented clearances that would enable his staff to receive intercepted communications and other sensitive material. Dulles also intended to discuss with Kennedy the legal basis for CIA's worldwide special operations. On the substantive side, in addition to Cuba, Dulles was prepared to brief Kennedy on operations in Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere in Central America. Agency activities in Tibet were also a discrete item.

The majority of the items to be raised did not address specific countries or regions. Rather, Dulles planned a thematic discussion of Agency propaganda and political action programs, with illustrative successes from around the world. Dulles was primed to provide examples of where the Agency had succeeded in reducing the power of communist parties abroad and in supporting the growth of constructive opposition parties. In a review of what was, at that time, still recent history, Dulles intended to inform Kennedy of CIA actions related to coups in Guatemala, Laos, and South Vietnam.

Regarding technical collection, Dulles was undoubtedly relieved to be able to discuss with Kennedy more fully the progress that had been made with aircraft and satellite systems to replace the U-2. The DCI's notes suggest he intended to discuss the existing U-2 program and two follow-on programs. One was the SR-71 aircraft, then under development, and the other the first imaging satellite, a film-return system.

Thirty years after the fact, there is no way to know with certainty how much of the material Dulles and Bissell prepared was actually discussed with Kennedy. Bissell remembers that the bulk of the time he and Dulles spent with Kennedy in Palm Beach was used to discuss Cuba. After that discussion, Bissell remembers that "Allen Dulles and John Kennedy drifted off to the end of the terrace and talked for some time about matters having nothing to do with Cuba." Bissell recalls that their conversation lasted at least 15 but certainly no more than 30 minutes. When shown several pages of his own handwritten notes

30. Richard Bissell, untitled and undated notes for briefing President-elect Kennedy.

concerning the issues the two had intended to raise, Bissell laughed and asserted that “nobody had time to cover everything that is on this list at any time prior to inauguration.”

Records of the Eisenhower White House suggest that Dulles discussed, or at least was authorized to discuss, only a narrow agenda with the president-elect at the Palm Beach meeting. On 17 November, the day before Dulles traveled to Florida, Goodpaster recorded that he had informed the president that he had discussed the agenda with the CIA director and with Gen. Wilton Persons, the White House chief of staff. Goodpaster had informed Dulles that CIA operations were to be disclosed to Kennedy only as specifically approved on a case-by-case basis by President Eisenhower. Goodpaster’s memorandum confirms Eisenhower had approved Dulles’s plan to inform Kennedy of operations relating to Cuba as well as to “certain reconnaissance satellite operations of a covert nature.” No other subjects were specifically approved.³¹

Dulles’s notes state not only that Eisenhower authorized the Palm Beach briefing but also that the briefing was given at his suggestion and that it covered “worldwide intelligence operations.” Bissell recalls that the scheduling of the briefing came up rather quickly. To his knowledge, Dulles received no guidance or suggestion from the White House on what the subject matter should be.

In discussing the politics of these briefings in 1993, Goodpaster remembered clearly the conflicting views the president and others in the White House had about them. On the one hand, some of Eisenhower’s preelection reservations had evaporated by mid-November. He had issued a directive that, because Kennedy was to be the next president, “We must help him in any way we can.” On the other hand, Goodpaster also remembers that Eisenhower had some uneasiness about how far Dulles should and would go in his discussions. The president believed ongoing deliberations by him and his advisers should remain confidential, and he worried about the inherent problems of protecting that confidentiality while at the same time briefing Kennedy fully.

Goodpaster’s records indicate he discussed with the president and Senior Staff Assistant Gordon Gray the “special problem” of Dulles’s continued attendance at NSC meetings once he had been designated

31. Andrew Goodpaster, memorandum for the record, 17 November 1960.

by Kennedy to serve in the next administration. Goodpaster informed Dulles that while the president wanted him to continue to attend NSC meetings, the proceedings of those sessions were not to be disclosed outside the NSC room. According to the records, he had the impression that “Mr. Dulles had not understood that this matter was a delicate one.” In 1993, Goodpaster reiterated that “there was a feeling that all this had to be explained pretty carefully to Allen Dulles.”

The Mystery Briefing of Late November

A number of books and articles written about the Bay of Pigs contain the assertion that Kennedy was informed in detail of the planned operation and gave his approval in a briefing by Dulles in late November 1960. A review of the chronology of these publications suggests that most authors picked up this piece of information from the widely read account of events contained in Schlesinger’s *A Thousand Days*. Schlesinger opened chapter 10, entitled “The Bay of Pigs,” with the statement: “On November 29, 1960, 12 days after he had heard about the Cuban project, the president-elect received from Allen Dulles a detailed briefing on CIA’s new military conception. Kennedy listened with attention, then told Dulles to carry the work forward.”³²

If this briefing occurred, it would be by far the most important in the series Kennedy received. This would place on the president-elect an earlier and more direct responsibility for the development of the operation than would otherwise be justified. In fact, however, the Dulles-Kennedy meeting of 29 November cited by Schlesinger appears not to have occurred at all. Available CIA records contain no mention of such a briefing. Dulles’s personal desk calendar shows that he had a very full day, with 10 different appointments running from 9:00 a.m. to 5:45 p.m., none of which was with the president-elect. It would be most extraordinary if the director’s calendar or other CIA records failed to note a meeting of the DCI with the president-elect. Similarly, there is nothing in information available about Kennedy’s activities to indicate that he met with Dulles that day. The *New York Times* of 30 November reported, “The Senator worked at home throughout the day [of 29 November] leaving only to visit his wife Jacqueline and son John F.

32. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 233.

Jr. in Georgetown University Hospital.” The newspapers also reported that Kennedy had met at home that day with prospective cabinet appointee Chester Bowles, and with Terry Sanford, the latter visiting to recommend Luther Hodges for a cabinet position. Other visitors to the Kennedy home in Georgetown included his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, Edward Foley of the Inaugural Committee, and Senator Dennis Chavez of New Mexico.³³

In thinking back on the briefings Kennedy received on the controversial Cuban operation, Ted Sorensen, his speechwriter and confidant, recalls, “President Kennedy did tell me, much later, that he had been briefed on the operation by the CIA while he was president-elect. CIA told him what they had in mind and why in some detail. That was the Palm Beach briefing.” Sorensen doubted that Kennedy received a more detailed briefing by Dulles on 29 November, adding, “I saw him every single day and we discussed the whole range of policy matters—the foreign issues as well as 500 domestic ones.”

Schlesinger was amused that he may have described a critical briefing that appears not to have occurred. In a letter to the author in 1993, he recommended that the original draft manuscript of his *A Thousand Days* be reviewed to ascertain whether the controversial assertion was footnoted. “If nothing turns up I must take Rick’s way out,” he wrote, referring to the character in *Casablanca* played by Humphrey Bogart. “Bogart: ‘I came to Casablanca for the waters.’ Claude Raines: ‘What waters? We’re in the desert.’ Bogart: ‘I was misinformed.’”³⁴

An important meeting concerning the Cuba operation, in fact, was held on 29 November at the White House at 11:00 a.m. with the president (Eisenhower) in the chair. The president-elect was not included. Schlesinger and other authors, writing a few years after the fact, had obviously learned that on that date “the president” was briefed on Cuba and, being oriented to president Kennedy, assumed that it was he who was involved. Indeed, the meeting of 29 November was an important one. On that date, Eisenhower underscored that he wanted to continue active planning for the project. Eisenhower was pushing ahead vigorously; Kennedy was not yet responsible in any degree.

33. *New York Times*, 30 November 1960, 1,30.

34. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., letter to the author, 23 June 1993.

Soon after his inauguration, Kennedy on 28 January 1961 did receive a full briefing on the planned Cuban operation. At that meeting the new president authorized the Agency to continue its preparations and asked that the paramilitary aspects of the plan be provided to the Joint Chiefs for their analysis. Even in late January, however, Kennedy withheld specific approval for an invasion, with or without direct US involvement.

Kennedy Visits the CIA

One unique aspect of Kennedy's familiarization with the CIA was the president-elect's decision to visit CIA Headquarters during the transition period. He was initially scheduled to visit the Agency's South Building, at 2430 E Street in downtown Washington, on 16 December. In preparation for the visit, Dulles asked Huntington Sheldon, the director of current intelligence, to prepare a book for the DCI containing material he and senior Agency officials should use in discussions with Kennedy.

The ambitious agenda that was prepared for the visit envisaged presentations by the DCI and eight other senior officers.³⁵ Briefings were prepared on the Agency's mission, organization, and budget, and on the legal basis for its activities. Dulles and others would describe the Agency's relationship with the Congress; the functions of such organizations as the Watch Committee and the President's Board of Consultants; and the functions of the several agencies that made up the Intelligence Community. The assistant director for national estimates would describe the estimates process and brief one specific paper, a recently published estimate of the world situation.

The chiefs of the Agency's key directorates were primed to explain their roles and activities. The clandestine services portion of the briefing included a description of clandestine intelligence collection and the covert action functions. In the latter discussion, the chief of operations was to update "Cuban operations since the Palm Beach briefing."

Owing to scheduling difficulties, Kennedy was unable to visit the Agency on 16 December. The visit was delayed until after the inau-

35. CIA, "Agenda for President-elect," 16 December 1960.

guration and finally occurred on Thursday, 26 January 1961. Dulles's desk calendar notes that the briefings were to run from 2:40 until 4:10 p.m. In reality, they had to be abbreviated considerably, much to the consternation of the participants, because an unintended opportunity came to the president's attention.

For reasons having nothing to do with Kennedy's visit, the Agency, a few weeks before, had put together an attractive exhibit of materials relating to the history of intelligence that was located just inside the entrance of South Building. A number of exhibits were displayed under a sign that read, "These letters loaned courtesy of the Houghton Library of Harvard University." The newly elected Harvard man immediately noticed the reference to his alma mater. He stopped and read thoroughly the entire case of historical materials, much to the chagrin of Dulles and other waiting CIA executives.

Kennedy was already frustrated at press leaks from his new administration and, therefore, was especially taken with one of the letters in the display case. Written by General Washington to Col. Elias Dayton in July 1777, that letter included the observation that "The necessity of procuring good Intelligence is apparent and need not be further urged—All that remains for me to add is, that you keep the whole matter as secret as possible. For upon Secrecy, Success depends in Most Enterprizes of the kind, and for want of it, they are generally defeated." Kennedy asked Dulles if he could have a copy of the letter, which, of course, was sent promptly. The president wrote the CIA director thanking him and the creator of the exhibit, Walter Pforzheimer, saying, "The letter is both a fine memento of my visit with you and a continuing reminder of the role of intelligence in national policy."³⁶

Origins of the *President's Intelligence Checklist*

Within days of his election, President Kennedy sent word to the White House that he would like to receive daily briefings on the same material that was being furnished to President Eisenhower.³⁷ The request from Kennedy came by way of one of his assistants for transition

36. John Kennedy letter to Allen Dulles, 10 February 1961.

37. Goodpaster, memorandum for record, 17 November 1960.

matters, Washington attorney Clark Clifford. Eisenhower approved the passage of this material to Kennedy on 17 November, the eve of Dulles's trip to Florida. There is no record that Dulles discussed this matter with Kennedy the next day, however, and some weeks were to go by before there was any organized follow-up.

When Kennedy visited CIA Headquarters after his inauguration, Sheldon described the current intelligence products that were available to him. Kennedy reiterated that he wanted to read the publications and designated his military aide, Brig. Gen. Chester Clifton, who was present at the meeting, to receive the material. Clifton had taken over Goodpaster's role of providing daily briefings to the new president, although Goodpaster continued to serve in the White House for a few weeks to help with the transition.

For the first few months of the Kennedy administration, Agency couriers each morning would deliver CIA's *Current Intelligence Bulletin* to Clifton. Clifton or McGeorge Bundy would then take the material to the president, reporting back his questions or comments if there were any. Unfortunately, the intelligence report was part of a large package of material Kennedy received each day and was often not read. This left the new president less well informed than he thought he was, a situation that was soon driven home to him during his unfortunate encounter with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna, when he found himself unprepared to respond to his adversary's boasting and bullying.

From the start of the Kennedy administration, Dulles had few opportunities to present intelligence directly to the president. In large part, this was because Kennedy did not hold regularly scheduled NSC meetings as Eisenhower and Truman had done. In addition, however, there was a problem of personal chemistry and a generational gap between the new president and the CIA director. Agency veterans at the time had the feeling that Dulles may have been patronizing to Kennedy in his early briefings and, thus, was not warmly welcomed to the White House.³⁸ Along the same lines, Sorensen remembers Kennedy "was not very impressed with Dulles's briefings. He did not think they were in much depth or told him anything he could not read in the newspapers." In these awkward circumstances, Dulles's practice was

38. Richard Lehman, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 10 March 1993.

to prepare written memorandums for the president on items that he deemed to be of particular significance, delivering them personally when possible. He also made personal deliveries when he wanted to bring certain important national estimates to the president's attention.

The fiasco at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, reinforced by Kennedy's frustration at the meeting with Khrushchev in early June, changed everything. General Clifton informed current intelligence director Sheldon that the president was reluctant to continue receiving intelligence in the normal way. Clifton suggested the Agency would have to come up with some entirely different way of presenting its information if it were to regain the president's confidence. He volunteered that there was no point in the DCI discussing the matter directly with the president as that would be counterproductive. Dulles took this implicit criticism calmly, possibly foreseeing that the president's disappointment with the Agency on this and other scores would lead, as it did in November 1961, to his own removal.

Dulles gamely soldiered on in his attempts to bring the new president the fruits of the Agency's collection and analysis in the traditional manner, but it was largely the unauthorized efforts of his subordinates that opened a new and less formal channel to the White House that would satisfy Kennedy and most of his successors. In mid-1961 Huntington Sheldon and other managers of the Office of Current Intelligence—working with Clifton but without the knowledge of their superiors either at the White House or the Agency—came up with a new intelligence briefing publication designed exclusively for the president. Longtime current intelligence specialist Richard Lehman worked up a dry run of the proposed *President's Intelligence Checklist* and Sheldon took it to Clifton for his approval. Clifton was pleased with the trial document, which eliminated the bewildering array of source classifications and restrictions common to intelligence publications and presented facts and analysis in short, vernacular paragraphs.

The first issue of the new publication was delivered to Clifton on Saturday, 17 June, and carried by him to the president at his country home near Middleburg, Virginia. The first *Checklist* was a small book of seven pages, measuring 8-1/2 by 8 inches, that contained 14 items of two sentences each with a half-dozen longer notes and a few maps. Agency managers spent a nervous weekend; they were immensely re-

lieved the following Monday morning to hear Clifton's "go ahead—so far, so good."

Quickly it became clear the president was reading the *Checklist* regularly and issuing instructions based on its contents. Not infrequently he asked to see source materials, estimates of developing situations highlighted for his attention, texts of speeches by foreign leaders, and occasional full-length Agency publications that provided more depth, details, and explanations. Within a few months, the secretaries of state and defense asked to see what the president was reading. In December, six months after publication had begun, Clifton passed the word to the Agency that those two cabinet members should be added to the subscriber list.

No Agency officer sat with the president while he read the *Checklist*, but Clifton was careful to pass back to the Agency the president's reactions and questions. CIA officials regarded the new system as the best possible daily channel to a president. The relationship with Kennedy was not only a distinct improvement over the more formal relationship with Eisenhower, but would only rarely be matched in future administrations.

Meanwhile, in November 1961, Allen Dulles's replacement, John McCone—who would serve Kennedy as DCI until the president's assassination two years later—began his tenure by rebuilding the Agency's relationship with Kennedy. McCone saw Kennedy frequently, and the president—more than any other before or since—would telephone even lower level Agency officers for information or assistance. Interestingly, McCone's prescience in alerting the president to the possibility that the Soviets would place missiles in Cuba backfired for him personally. Although McCone was right when most others were wrong, the president did not like the DCI's public references to this fact, and their relationship cooled noticeably.

Editors of the *Checklist* were especially heartened in September 1963 when Clifton passed back the president's personal expression of delight with "the book." A month later, on a morning when Clifton, McGeorge Bundy, and the Agency's briefing officer were huddled in the basement of the West Wing going over the *Checklist*, President Kennedy called down asking where they were and when they were going to bring it to him. Clifton and his Agency contacts were also heartened by Secretary

of State Dean Rusk's comment that the *Checklist* was "a damned useful document."

President Kennedy's *Checklist* was published daily for two and a half years, capturing the regular attention of the president and serving his needs. Created out of an almost desperate desire to please a president who had found the Agency wanting, it proved to be the forerunner of the *President's Daily Brief*, the publication that was to serve all presidents from 1964 to the present.³⁹

The Transition to President Johnson

The transition to President Johnson was as abrupt for the US Intelligence Community as it was for the rest of the country. In some respects, it was also as uncertain. Johnson had received a number of intelligence briefings as chairman of the Senate Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee and later as Senate majority leader. He had met on one occasion with Allen Dulles in July 1960 while a vice-presidential candidate, but neither Dulles nor his successor, John McCone, had paid much attention to keeping Johnson informed during the intervening years.

Johnson, in turn, had paid relatively little attention to the products of the Intelligence Community while he was vice president. Each day his office received the Agency's *Current Intelligence Bulletin*, a widely distributed product that contained less sensitive and less highly classified information than was included in the *Checklist*. Although the *Checklist* at the end of the Kennedy presidency was being sent also to the secretaries of defense and state and to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Johnson was unaware of its existence. For reasons undoubtedly growing out of the earlier political rivalry between Kennedy and Johnson, Kennedy's intelligence assistant, Bromley Smith, early in the administration had ordered that "under no circumstances should the *Checklist* be given to Johnson."⁴⁰

39. In 2015, CIA officially released declassified, redacted copies of the PDB and its predecessor, *The President's Intelligence Checklist* prepared for the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. The release included some 2,500 documents, which are available in CIA's Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room on www.cia.gov.

40. Lehman interview, 10 March 1993.

On Saturday morning, 23 November 1963, the day following Kennedy's assassination, McCone instructed his executive assistant, Walter Elder, to telephone the new president's secretary and inform her that the DCI would, as usual, be at the White House at 9:00 a.m. to give the president the regular morning intelligence briefing.⁴¹ In reality, there was nothing usual or regular about the DCI's involvement in a morning briefing, but McCone obviously believed he needed to take an extraordinary initiative to establish a relationship with the new president.

McCone was waiting in Bundy's office in the basement of the West Wing when Johnson entered at approximately 9:15. Johnson had been an infrequent visitor to those quarters, which also included the White House Situation Room, but he was forced to come there for the meeting because Kennedy's office had not yet been cleared out. R. Jack Smith, CIA's director of current intelligence, was present and talked briefly with Johnson in Bundy's outer office, writing later that the president looked "massive, rumpled and worried."⁴²

Despite the irregular and strained nature of the circumstances, McCone accomplished his mission during that first meeting with President Johnson. The president expressed his confidence in McCone, who, in turn, reassured the new president that he and the Agency stood ready to support him in every way. McCone introduced the president to the *Checklist* and reviewed with him the unspectacular substantive items in the publication that day. Johnson had few questions during their 15-minute session, but he did agree that McCone should brief him personally each morning at least for the next several days. He asked that the director bring any urgent matters to his attention at any time, day or night.

The *Checklist* shown to Johnson on that first occasion was a bulky publication containing five unusually long items and six additional notes. R. Jack Smith explained to Bromley Smith that the Agency had tried to provide, as unobtrusively as possible, a bit of extra background for Johnson. Bromley Smith approved the strategy but added that he hoped the Agency would not be too obvious in its tutorials. In his memoirs, Johnson wrote of his relief to discover "on that sad Novem-

41. Walter Elder, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 21 April 1993.

42. R. Jack Smith, *The Unknown CIA: My Three Decades with the Agency* (Pergamon-Brassy's, 1989), 163.



Attorney General Robert Kennedy and new DCI John McCone.

ber morning” that the international front was relatively peaceful and that there was nothing in the material McCone brought to him that required an immediate decision.⁴³

McCone met with Johnson almost every day for the next two or three weeks, briefing him on virtually all the world’s trouble spots and providing information from CIA files and collection efforts on President Kennedy’s assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. The president told the director to make sure that CIA gave the FBI all information and support necessary to its investigation of Oswald’s background.

McCone also used these opportunities to inform the president of a variety of CIA covert action and technical collection programs, including the successful effort to build what became known as the SR-71 reconnaissance aircraft to augment the U-2. McCone brought the president up to date on the status of the program (by that time a number of aircraft had been built) and to brief him on McCone’s discussions with President Kennedy about the advisability of making the program public. Secretaries Rusk and McNamara had urged Kennedy to announce the aircraft’s existence and Kennedy was inclined to do so. But a discussion of the political and security issues involved prompted Johnson

43. Lyndon Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 22.

to postpone any public announcement of the program. He ordered McCone to get as many aircraft produced and deployed to the operating site as possible and eventually revealed the existence of the aircraft at a press conference in February 1964.

Vietnam

The most significant issue Johnson and McCone discussed during this period undoubtedly was Vietnam. McCone was straightforward in providing the Agency's analysis of the course of the war there. Initially, this won him favor with the new president, who had not favored certain of the steps taken in Vietnam by his predecessor, but it was to lead ultimately to a falling out between McCone and Johnson.

On 24 November, a mere two days after Kennedy's assassination, Johnson met at 3:00 p.m. in the Executive Office Building with Rusk, McNamara, George Ball, Bundy, McCone, and Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge. According to McCone, Lodge informed the group that the United States had not been involved in the recent coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem.⁴⁴ In fact, Lodge had instructed a CIA liaison officer to tell the South Vietnamese generals that the US government had lost confidence in President Diem, and he was kept aware of events before and during the coup on 1 November. During the course of the military takeover, Diem was captured and then killed.

Lodge maintained that the population of South Vietnam was very happy as a result of the coup, showing the group assembled at the Executive Office Building some pictures of crowds in Saigon. Lodge argued that the change in government in South Vietnam had been an improvement and that he was hopeful about the course of the war, expecting "marked progress" by February or March 1964. He also stated, without elaboration, that there were indications that North Vietnam might be interested in reaching mutually satisfactory arrangements with the United States. McCone wrote in his memorandum for the record that Lodge's statements were "optimistic, hopeful and left the president with the impression that we were on the road to victory."

44. John McCone, "South Vietnam Situation," memorandum for the record, 25 November 1961.

McCone presented the group with a much more pessimistic CIA assessment. He cited the continuing increase in Viet Cong activity over the previous month, predicting more and sustained pressures from the guerrillas. The director pointed out that the South Vietnamese military was having considerable trouble organizing the government and was receiving little help from civilian leaders, who seemed to be staying on the sidelines. McCone said the Intelligence Community could not give an optimistic appraisal of the future.

Johnson stated that he approached the situation in Vietnam with misgivings and was anxious about calls in the Congress for a US withdrawal. While recognizing he would have to live with the results of the coup, he was particularly doubtful the United States had taken the right course in upsetting the Diem regime. He was critical, even harsh, about the divisions within the ranks of US advisers about the conduct of the war. He made clear his desire to replace several key figures in the US country team in Saigon and dictated that he “wanted no more divisions of opinion, no more bickering, and any person that did not conform to policy should be removed.”

During McCone’s daily discussions of the *Checklist*, the president regularly raised the question of Vietnam. Despite his strictures against differences of opinion, he appeared to appreciate the fact that McCone’s assessments did not correspond to what he was hearing from others. The president repeatedly asked for the director’s appraisal of the situation, but the continuing exchange between the two ultimately proved troublesome for the director. In large part this was because Johnson sought McCone’s advice on the sensitive issue of who should “run the show” in South Vietnam and discussed his thoughts on possible personnel changes among his advisers and ambassadors.

Johnson remarked to McCone that, although he appreciated the work the DCI was doing in intelligence, he did not want him to confine himself to that role. The president invited the director to come to him personally with suggestions for courses of action on policy that McCone thought wise, even if his ideas were not consistent with the advice others were providing. Johnson mentioned specifically that he was not satisfied with the advice he was receiving on nuclear testing, Cuba, and particularly South Vietnam. The president questioned McCone closely about the prospects in South Vietnam, underscoring his desire for an

“objective appraisal.” Johnson specifically asked for any recommendations McCone might have for modifying his Vietnam policy.

Johnson’s confiding in McCone during the first two weeks of his presidency clearly flattered the CIA director but also put him in an awkward position with other key players in the government, as well as with regard to his obligation provide objective intelligence assessments. Within months, events were to reveal that McCone probably took the president more literally than he should have. The DCI’s candor in providing advice to the president eventually strained their relationship.

The president was not so completely preoccupied with Vietnam that he did not remember to focus on another enduring problem—the Castro regime in Cuba. Within a week of becoming president, he asked McCone how effective US policy was regarding Cuba and what the CIA projected to be the future of that country. Johnson was especially interested in the effectiveness of the economic embargo of Cuba and wanted to know what the Agency planned to do to dispose of Castro. The president said he did not want any repetition of “the fiasco of 1961,” the CIA-planned rebel invasion, but he felt the United States could not abide the existing Cuban situation and wanted the CIA to propose a more aggressive strategy. Johnson informed McCone that he looked to the CIA for firm recommendations.

Initially, it was unclear whether Johnson would return to a system of regular NSC meetings or continue the more casual Kennedy approach. There was, therefore, much interest in the NSC meeting the president called for 5 December 1963. At that meeting, McCone was to brief the group on the Soviet military and economic situation. He prepared thoroughly for this first NSC meeting with the new president, bringing one assistant, Clinton Conger, and a number of large briefing charts to the meeting.

To McCone’s surprise, Johnson had invited to the meeting the chairmen and ranking minority members of the leading congressional committees. The director accommodated this novel approach by quickly briefing the congressional leaders on the fact of, and restrictions related to, communications intercepts, which were to be mentioned during the briefing. Just as the meeting began, however, there was another surprise when the president gave a nod and in came his

White House photographer. McCone was aghast as the photographer began shooting pictures left and right. He turned around with a start to confirm that Conger had managed to turn over a map of Soviet ICBM sites before the first pictures were taken of that end of the room. In the subsequent months, it was to become clear that Johnson was no more enamored of weekly NSC meetings than Kennedy had been. When a rare meeting was held, however, it normally began with an intelligence briefing by McCone.

With few formal NSC meetings, much of the Agency's relationship with the new president came to rest on the briefings McCone was providing Johnson privately. Unfortunately, these soon became a casualty of the differences emerging between the two men regarding Vietnam. The momentum of McCone's contacts with Johnson was interrupted by a trip the director took in December 1963 to review the Vietnamese situation. It was his second trip to Saigon since becoming DCI, and McCone was discouraged by what he found. His pessimism made him skeptical of proposals Defense Secretary McNamara made for an extended program of clandestine raids against North Vietnam in early 1964. During a subsequent trip to Vietnam in March 1964, McCone's reservations deepened, and he concluded that the war effort, even with McNamara's enhancements, was not succeeding.

McCone recommended to the president a six-point program to reverse the deteriorating situation that would involve an escalation of US military actions significantly beyond anything McNamara and Johnson had considered. Johnson refused to accept the DCI's recommendations. As the president came to side with McNamara's approach to the conduct of the war, he became increasingly impatient with McCone and with the continuing differences between the DCI and the secretary of defense. By the end of March 1964, Johnson clearly had lost confidence in McCone and interest in his regular intelligence updates. In the succeeding months McCone attempted periodically to restart his briefings of the president, at least on an occasional basis, but Johnson turned him aside.

In June 1964 the director informed the president for the first time that he would like to resign as soon as Johnson had decided on a successor.⁴⁵ Despite his growing disenchantment with McCone, Johnson

45. Elder interview, 21 April 1993.

insisted that he remain in his post until after the presidential election in November 1964.

Evolution to the *President's Daily Brief*

Providing the *Checklist* to President Kennedy had worked so well that CIA naturally hoped the arrangement would continue with Johnson, but this was not to be. In his first weeks as president, Johnson read the *Checklist* and seemed interested in discussing its contents during his meetings with McCone. After those meetings stopped, however, Johnson tended not to read the daily publication.

Observing that Johnson was no longer reading the *Checklist*, General Clifton (who had stayed on from the Kennedy administration as military aide to the president) proposed the idea of a twice-weekly intelligence report. CIA managers thought this strategy was worth a try. In truth, they thought that anything that would catch the president's eye was worth a try; several formats were offered during this period. They had been dismayed by Bromley Smith's assessment that Johnson was probably disinclined to read the Kennedy-tailored *Checklist* that had been denied him as vice president.

On 9 January the first issue of the semiweekly was taken to Clifton at the White House. The next morning Clifton called Lehman at CIA to report that he had shown the new publication to the president at breakfast and it had "worked like a charm." At the end of January, Clifton again made a point of seeking Johnson's reaction to the *Intelligence Review*. The president observed at that point that he found it a valuable supplement to the intelligence briefings he received and wanted the publication continued without change.

Although the president read primarily the semiweekly review, his staff requested that the *Checklist* continue to be published daily to enable them to answer the president's frequent spur-of-the-moment questions. With the president not reading the *Checklist* most days, McCone decided he would expand its readership; he obtained permission to send it to four additional officials in the State Department, two more in Defense and in the Joint Chiefs, and to the offices of the secretary of the treasury and the attorney general.

The practice of producing two presidential intelligence publications worked well through the election year of 1964. The president typically read the *Review* on the return leg of campaign trips, and his staff felt well supported with the daily *Checklist*. As the election neared, however, Secretary of State Rusk expressed to McCone his concern about the security of the *Checklist* as a result of its expanded dissemination. Rusk was worried about possible leaks regarding sensitive policy issues during the campaign. The DCI was more concerned about the basic question of whether it made any sense to publish a “presidential” *Checklist* when the president himself almost never read it, but agreed something should be done.

Meanwhile, during the 1964 electoral campaign, Johnson’s opponent, Senator Barry Goldwater, set a precedent by declining to receive intelligence briefings. In July, after consulting with the president, McCone had telephoned Goldwater to offer the customary briefings. According to his assistant, Walter Elder, Goldwater replied only that he would consider it. Within hours, an assistant called to decline, explaining that the senator appreciated the offer but felt he had all the information he needed to conduct his campaign. McCone, reflecting a frustration he and Johnson shared, mused, “He probably does; the Air Force tells him everything he wants to know.”

Responding to the concerns of the secretary of state and the DCI about the circulation of the *Checklist*, R. Jack Smith proposed that the most graceful way for the Agency to drop a number of the readers of the *Checklist* would be to discontinue the publication and produce a new one. Smith observed that the Agency would maximize the likelihood that Johnson would accept a new publication and read it regularly if it were produced to conform as much as possible to his work habits. Because Johnson did much of his reading at night, in bed, Smith recommended that the publication be published and delivered in the late afternoon as the *Review* had been, rather than in the morning like the *Checklist*.

Smith’s proposal was accepted, and after the election both the *Checklist* and the *Review* were dropped. The new *President’s Daily Brief*, designed specifically for President Johnson, was delivered to the White House on 1 December 1964. Its fresh appearance obviously appealed to the president. His assistant, Jack Valenti, sent the first issue back

to Bundy with word that the president read it, liked it, and wanted it continued. Quite apart from the packaging of the current intelligence, President Johnson—like other presidents—was becoming a closer reader of the daily products as he became increasingly enmeshed in foreign policy matters. By mid-February 1965, for example, he was reading not only the PDB but also CIA's daily Vietnam situation report, which Bromley Smith insisted be delivered at 8:00 a.m. each day so that it could be sent to the president early.

In early 1965, Johnson agreed that the time had come for McCone to return to the private sector. That understanding undoubtedly was furthered by a letter the director delivered to Johnson on 2 April in which he argued against an expanded land war in Vietnam and concluded that US bombing was ineffective.⁴⁶ By coincidence, the day that McCone passed the directorship of CIA to his successor, VAdm. William Raborn—28 April—was also the day US Marines landed in the Dominican Republic to deal with the crisis there. It was during the Dominican crisis that word was received that the PDB had taken firm root in the White House. Presidential spokesman Bill Moyers said on 21 May, approximately six months after the PDB had been launched, that the president read it “avidly.”

The PDB process that was in place in early 1965 continued more or less unchanged throughout the Johnson administration. CIA did not receive from Johnson the steady presidential feedback that it had received from Kennedy. The Agency knew, however, that the president was reading the PDB regularly, and Johnson's aides, usually Bromley Smith, were consistently helpful in passing back the president's reactions, criticisms, and requests. The only significant change made in the PDB process came when the president again reversed himself and indicated he wanted to receive the PDB early in the morning rather than in the evening. He had decided that he wanted to see the PDB at 6:30 a.m., before he began reading the morning newspapers.

Those newspapers later provided conclusive evidence that the publication was reaching the president. Agency personnel were surprised one morning to see a photograph in the papers showing President and Mrs. Johnson sitting in the White House in dressing gowns. Mrs. John-

46. *Ibid.*



President and Mrs. Lyndon Johnson pose with their grandchild and a copy of the PDB.

son was holding their first grandson while the president was reading a copy of the *President's Daily Brief*.

