

## Driving the Yanquis Bananas (The Feeling was Mutual)

*Red Heat: Conspiracy, Murder, and the Cold War in the Caribbean* by Alex Von Tunzelmann (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2011), illustrated, 449 pp.

*The Brilliant Disaster: JFK, Castro, and America's Doomed Invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs* by Jim Rasenberger (New York: Scribner, 2011), 480 pp.

**Reviewed by Thomas G. Coffey**

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In a scene in Woody Allen's film *Bananas*, US paramilitaries are flying to the troubled, Latin American backwater San Marcos, where insurgents are attempting to overthrow the military junta. One paramilitary asks out-loud, "[are we] for or against the government?" "The CIA is not taking any chances," responds another officer, "some of us are for it and some of us are gonna to be against it."

As authors von Tunzelmann and Rasenberger tell it, US officials did indeed try to have it both ways in the Caribbean, with policy fluctuating between hostility toward repressive regimes of all political types, and supporting regional leaders who served as bulwarks against the perceived threat of communism in the region. The result of US policy, in von Tunzelmann's view, was overwhelming political and economic hardship for the citizens of the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba. Intelligence officers supporting US policymakers found themselves just as conflicted in their approach towards covert action and in their intelligence analysis. These two books offer unique insights into the trickiness, if not hazards, of this relationship.

Von Tunzelmann's *Red Heat: Conspiracy, Murder, and the Cold War in the Caribbean* chronicles in fascinating fashion US attempts to have it both ways with Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, François Duvalier of Haiti, and, to a lesser extent, Fulgencio Batista

of Cuba, mostly during the 1950s and 1960s. The dictators, while contemptuous of the conflicted US policy, recognized the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations could be manipulated. Although it was inevitable US patience would eventually wear thin with these leaders (Duvalier in the mid fifties, Batista in the late fifties, and Trujillo in the early sixties), they played the game masterfully, sensing Washington would usually default to their sides to prevent communism from taking off in the region.

After a thorough look at the history of these countries and the rise of their leading figures, von Tunzelmann centers her story on Castro's takeover of Cuba and the reaction of Washington, Santo Domingo, and Port au Prince. The reader is treated to a retelling of the never-gets-old story about the Kennedys—and Eisenhower—having CIA officers press the Mafia to assassinate Castro, as well as tales of the Bay of Pigs and Cuban missile crisis.

Von Tunzelmann offers particularly unique insights about Castro, once he was finally well ensconced in Havana, with Washington fearing the establishment of "another Cuba" or a "Dominican Castro," because communist movements were wrongly assumed to be either so large or well disciplined that they could easily take over any democratic opposition with a little help from Castro.

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The author also does a good job of attempting to understand Castro's perspective. Lost on US officials was the possibility that Castro wanted little to do with these Caribbean basket cases. Although early on, Castro did back insurgents using Cuba as a base to launch invasions against Haiti and the Dominican Republic—after all, both these countries' leaders had made similar moves against him—von Tunzelmann notes Castro had little interest in being an occupier. Perhaps Castro and his advisers wondered at what stage of proletariat evolution Haiti was when its leader felt it necessary to kill every black dog in Port-au-Prince because Haitians believed these dogs were the reincarnation of an opposition leader who had gone into hiding.

*Red Heat* goes wrong in some places. Von Tunzelmann belongs to the school of thought contending that the US hard-line policy toward Castro helps sustain his regime and repressive apparatus, but she decries US engagement with Duvalier's Haiti and Trujillo's Dominican Republic. To underscore their repressiveness, the author gives detail after detail about the cruelties Duvalier and Trujillo inflicted upon their citizens, but no such descriptions are reserved for Castro and his repressive regime. She introduces race into a discussion of Kennedy's decision to park the fleet outside Port-au-Prince when it appeared Duvalier was taking his vengeance against foreigners, a clear redline with any foreign government. Lastly, von Tunzelmann has a disconcerting habit of quoting from Tim Weiner's deeply flawed polemic about the CIA, *Legacy of Ashes*.

More than the domestic cruelties and foreign manipulations of Batista, Trujillo, and Duvalier, it was the increasingly hostile anti-US rhetoric and communist leanings of Castro that drove the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations the most bananas. US officials went up a tree and out on a limb to overthrow Castro by having the CIA devise an exceedingly ambitious operation at the Bay of Pigs. 50 years after the Bay of Pigs disaster, Jim Rasenberger does a terrific job of documenting the faults of all parties engaged in the operation in *The Brilliant Disaster: JFK, Castro, and America's Doomed Invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs*.

Unlike some Bay of Pigs accounts, this retelling, much to the author's credit, spreads the blame around.

The brainchild of Richard Bissell, the CIA's deputy director for plans, the Bay of Pigs operational plan took shape under Eisenhower—although Ike stressed no formal "plans" were made during his tenure. The operation called for the invasion of Cuba by 1,400 of its exiles—covertly supplied and trained in Guatemala by the CIA, US military, and National Guard officials. The exiles were to establish a beachhead and after 7 to 10 days incite a sufficient mass of Cuban citizens to join them in overthrowing Castro. If these goals were not met, the exiles would establish an alternative government that would receive US political and, supposedly, military support. In the worst case of the exiles failing to establish a beachhead, they were to withdraw to the mountains as a guerrilla force.

Key pillars to the plan were the rallying of a large underground of Castro opponents, catching the Cuban regime by surprise, having an escape route for the exiles, and destroying the Cuban air force. Rasenberger, in a clear and systematic fashion, tells of the undoing of each of these pillars, with the real nail in the operation's coffin being Kennedy's decision to cancel the second round of exile airstrikes against Castro's air force, fearing the strikes would raise the volume of the invasion and give away US involvement. His last minute decision enabled Castro to strafe exile aircraft, shipping, and soldiers to devastating effect during the beach landing. The damage doomed the exile force, which held the beachhead for only three days before being overrun.

Rasenberger is hard on Kennedy, who is portrayed as a victim of his own misunderstandings, if not delusions, about the operation and of an ad hoc national security apparatus he promoted. The president did not press National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy to systematically solicit and condense the views of the foreign policy team. Nor did Bundy control the flow of information to the president, who essentially functioned as his own staffer. Yet even in the absence of a gatekeeper, officials at meetings

with the president often failed to give their views. This does not let Kennedy off the hook, for Senator William Proxmire, presidential aide Arthur Schlesinger, Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles, and former Secretary of State Dean Acheson shared their strong misgivings. While Proxmire, Schlesinger, and Bowles gave wordy and moralistic critiques, Acheson looked more at the nuts and bolts of the operation, distilling its main flaw this way: "It does not take Price Waterhouse to figure out that 1,500 Cubans are not as good as 25,000 [the size of the Cuban army]." Kennedy was duly warned, Rasenberger argues, and is not a victim as portrayed by some of his confidants.

At the same time, the author goes relatively easy on the CIA, whose officers were largely guilty of poor communication and unwillingness to abandon a changed invasion plan. Direct in their briefings to the president, Bissell and Allen Dulles were mostly at fault for errors of omission and for putting on the hard sell. The two officers failed to underscore the importance of the airstrikes. They also did not make clear that US military assistance for the provisional government would be required if a mass overthrow of Castro did not take place. Lastly, they did not underscore that moving the landing site effectively negated any chance of the exile force escaping slaughter or imprisonment if Castro's army prevailed.

A broader definition of culpability for CIA officers should apply, starting with their ignoring some basic tenets of covert action in the Bay of Pigs action. The operation was too big, involved too many parties, and developed over too long a period to be kept covert. Bureaucratic and interagency turf issues undercut vetting of the operational plan. Paradoxically, given how knowable this operation became, Bissell and the Cuba Task Force kept to themselves, pushing aside the heads of clandestine operations and the analytical group, all of whom knew Castro was very popular and not susceptible to a mass uprising. Although Bissell did make parish calls to State and Defense Department officials about the operation, he fed the perception this was a CIA show. In the end, neither of these department heads offered support when—with US involvement obvious

to the world—the time came to make the case for the second airstrikes.

Von Tunzelmann and Rasenberger both have a flair for spotting the telling anecdote, and there are many in each book, including

from von Tunzelmann:

*Kennedy, struck by the audacity of Khrushchev placing missiles in Cuba, wondered how the Soviet leader would feel if Washington placed missiles in Turkey. McGeorge Bundy reminded Kennedy that the US military had done just that.*

*Kennedy did not publicly gloat after the missile crisis, but did crow to his friends about the payback Khrushchev received for his bullying behavior during the earlier summit with Kennedy in Vienna.*

and from Rasenberger:

*All attempts at plausible deniability aside, a CIA officer—a frogman scouting the beach in advance—fired the first shot of the Bay of Pigs invasion at a local militiaman.*

*The exiles fought tenaciously to protect two of the landing zones before having to retreat. In one battle, Cuban army dead and wounded—500 dead, 1,000 wounded—vastly outnumbered those of the exiles—20 dead, 50 wounded, despite the Cuban Army having 20 tanks and outnumbering the exiles 7 to 1.*

A reading of both books provides some additional lessons for intelligence officers conducting operations and analysis in such a charged, uncertain policy environment:

*Excessive corner cutting on covert action to keep up a fiction. Cancellation of the "too loud, WWII-like" second strike against Castro's air force doomed any chance the Bay of Pigs had of success. Dulles and Bissell later regretted not telling Kennedy the operation would fail without a second strike. In a larger sense, the operation gave policymakers—who wanted to overthrow Castro while not being held accountable for it—the false sense that they could avoid the hard decisions and consequences of an overt invasion by using covert action. Ken-*

nedy seemed to recognize this and had the Joint Chiefs draw up invasion plans for Cuba soon after the Bay of Pigs.

*Briefing covert action is an exercise in advocacy.* In *The Brilliant Disaster*, Dulles had no qualms acknowledging his briefing of the Bay of Pigs plan involved advocacy. “It isn’t your job to say, ‘Well, that’s a rotten plan I’ve presented.’” National security team members Robert McNamara and Rusk could have provided sanity checks but remained oddly aloof during the planning and execution of the Bay of Pigs, even though their departments had a huge stake in a successful outcome given their indirect roles in the operation. Rasenberger speculates all wanted to do something about Castro but had no better ideas. Kennedy, Dulles, or Bissell would have benefited greatly if one of them had pressed policymakers to challenge the plan.

*Some covert actions inevitably risk revealing the US hand.* Given the exile community’s inability to keep a secret and the “Made in the USA” design of the Castro assassination schemes—use of the mafia, exploding sea-shells, and melting poisons—a successful attempt on the Cuban leader’s life would have exposed the US role with potentially enormous consequences for US policy. Likewise when it came to Trujillo, the CIA, according to von Tunzelmann, proposed giving the opposition high-powered rifles that were hard to come by in the Dominican Republic. Yet neither book talks of any US contingency planning to deal with the fallout of a successful assassination attempt. In any event, Johnson shut down the “damned Murder Incorporated” upon taking office.

*Groupthink can negatively affect analysis and policy.* Paradoxically, much of the conflicted nature of US policy towards the Caribbean resulted from what von Tunzelmann calls the “central myth of the Cuban revolution,” which states that as few as 12 communist insurgents had stolen an island from a well-armed, pro-US dictator. However, Castro had wide connections to a large opposition under-

ground, and Batista lacked both the will to fight and the inclination to make necessary political changes, so he essentially handed Cuba to Castro. Washington’s belief in the myth allowed Trujillo and his successors, as well as Duvalier, to scare US officials when a strong opposition threatened these Caribbean leaders by saying the communists, even if small in number, had infiltrated the opposition. The fallback policy position for Washington was usually to side with the known strongman than risk a communist takeover.

*Conflicted analysis is vulnerable to policymaker cherry picking.* Intelligence analysis along the following lines comes up all too often in the books: “The possibility that Juan Bosch (successor to Trujillo) was secretly procommunist or a party member cannot be ruled out.” Months later, analysts found “no evidence that Bosch is a communist...but he could be overwhelmed by communists.” This reading of Bosch sank him in the eyes of the Kennedy administration. Near the end of *Bananas*, the disheveled, college dropout turned rebel leader of San Marcos, Fielding Mellish, describes his administration’s predicament this way: “The Americans won’t recognize us—they think we’re communists. The communists won’t recognize us—they think we’re American puppets. The one person who recognizes us was arrested on a morals charge.” It’s debatable whether the democratically elected Bosch of the Dominican Republic had even this much international support in 1963. Von Tunzelmann clearly sees Bosch as one of the more progressive and sympathetic figures in a region unable to overcome Washington’s default policy supporting regional strongmen while trying to have it both ways. Two years later Johnson sent 23,000 US troops to put down an insurgency led by Bosch, who was forced to join a provisional government. He then went on to lose elections to the American-backed candidate the following year.

Johnson was now free to send US soldiers to a part of the world where lots of communist insurgents actually existed: South Vietnam.

