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The Bay of Pigs

What appears at the time to be the least consequential of presidential decisions often can have the most far-reaching results. The fateful sort of presidential decision that is recognized for what it is at the time—such as John F. Kennedy's reluctant "go" signal for the Bay of Pigs invasion—can have results that are literally incalculable, with ample opportunity later on for speculating on might-have-beens.

The most immediately obvious might-have-been to be considered in any post-mortem on the Bay of Pigs is that President Kennedy himself might still be alive if he had acted then as his head told him to act, and simply scrubbed the whole romantic business from the CIA's drawing boards immediately upon being apprised of it.

We are told now in Arthur M. Schlesinger's "A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House"—as it is being serialized in Life magazine in advance of publication—that one of the principal reasons why Mr. Kennedy did act against his better judgment was out of fear of "disappointing" the expatriate Cubans who had been assured by the CIA that they would have this chance to reclaim their homeland. If the thing were simply called off, it was persuasively argued, disillusioned members of the disbanded invasion force would fan throughout the rest of Latin America, taking their disillusionment with them.

So the thing was laid on, with consequences more disastrous than anything contemplated in the night thoughts of John F. Kennedy, even, with the result that the demoralized survivors of the Cuban liberation movement were dispersed throughout the rest of Latin

America (and, more significantly perhaps, throughout the United States), carrying their disillusionment with them. The assassination of John F. Kennedy two-and-a-half years later was carried out in an atmosphere of emotional extremism that had been fanned at one end by the failure of the Bay of Pigs and at the other by the fact that the invasion had been attempted in the first place.

Almost everything that Mr. Schlesinger has had to say in his "inside" account of the Bay of Pigs had already been made public. However, his version sounds all the more authoritative for the fact that he is a trained historian, who, as a close adviser to President Kennedy, was quite aware at the time that he was watching history in the making.

We are struck once again by an impression that the Central Intelligence Agency has been the most "un-American" agency in the government in the sense that it is farthest from the dreams of the Founders (although, to be sure, not all that far from their nightmares). At the Bay of Pigs, as on other occasions before and since, the CIA actually sought to "make" policy that not only was beyond the ken of the legislative branch—as CIA policy is deliberately designed to be—but beyond the full control of the executive branch as well.

We are struck for the first time by how little there may actually be to those ostentatious foreign policy "briefings" that an incumbent President extends to the opposition Party's nominee in presidential years: According to Mr. Schlesinger, Mr. Kennedy first learned of the well-matured Cuban plan 12 days after his election as President, when former CIA Director Allen W. Dulles gave it to him cold, representing it as being all but a *fait accompli*—barring what in effect would have had to be a presidential countermand.

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