

# Mortal Enemies?

## Did President Kennedy Plan on Splintering the CIA?

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In late April 1961, over fourteen hundred members of the Cuban Expeditionary Forces landed at the Bay of Pigs, in Cuba. Their mission was to overthrow the communist regime of Cuban President Fidel Castro. The mission was a striking failure. Almost immediately it became known that the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) trained the "freedom fighters:" Cubans trained to overthrow the Castro regime. American President John F. Kennedy had approved the mission. President Kennedy soon after the failure spoke at a meeting of the American Association of Newspaper Editors and assumed all blame for the failed invasion. His staff then began leaking information to reporters, blaming the failure on anyone except the administration.

(1) President Kennedy was quoted as saying, "How could I have been so stupid?" to trust the groups who were advising him, such as the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). (2) Even more damning to the CIA was a reputed quote by President Kennedy that he wanted to "splinter the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it into the winds." (3)

Two and a half years after Kennedy supposedly uttered these words, he was assassinated along a motorcade route in Dallas, Texas. The official government story is that a lone gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald, killed Kennedy. Many are not satisfied with the official version, supported by the Warren Commission. A popular conspiracy theory claims that because Kennedy was planning on dismantling the intelligence infrastructure, the CIA had Kennedy killed, and then later covered up the assassination plot. It is conceivable that splintering the CIA into a thousand pieces might cause some in the CIA to wonder whether Kennedy was good for the CIA in particular and the entire country in general. Perceiving the President as a security threat would be ample motive for the assassination. But did President Kennedy indeed intend to dismantle the CIA?

To conclude that Kennedy planned on splintering the CIA would require one to assume either (1) that either Kennedy never liked the CIA and finally had his excuse to lessen their power, or (2) that Kennedy was so angry at the CIA after the Bay of Pigs he changed his mind about the role of the intelligence agency. Former CIA Director Allen Dulles had the privilege of briefing the then Senator Kennedy during his campaign for the Presidency in the summer of 1960. When asked in an interview by Thomas Braden in 1964 if Kennedy was interested in intelligence matters during briefings, Dulles replied, "President Kennedy liked to get snappy, short, but at the same time reasonably comprehensive — as to subject matter — notes. And we'd get to him every morning several sheets of paper." (4) According to Dulles, Kennedy never found intelligence operations offensive or immoral. (5) In fact, Kennedy was so enthralled with intelligence operations that he even got Dulles hooked on Ian Fleming's James Bond spy novels. (6) Kennedy liked secrecy and spying so much that Robert Kennedy did not know about the Bay of Pigs invasion until days before the launch. (7) In fact, Kennedy used the CIA to wage a war on Laos that was kept secret from Congress for years. (8) In his tenure as President, Kennedy never once told the CIA to stop any operation that was ongoing at the time of his inauguration or those that began afterward. (9) Kennedy's actions as President show his strong interests in foreign affairs and intelligence. Since the CIA was set up as the intelligence arm of the Executive branch, the CIA was the best information source for President Kennedy. (10)

**Kennedy used the CIA to wage a war on Laos that was kept secret from Congress for years**

Given Kennedy's affinity for covert operations and secrecy, the next question is whether Kennedy's attitudes towards intelligence changed after the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Richard Bissell, who ran the invasion for the CIA, indicates that Kennedy's confidence in the CIA was indeed undermined after the Bay of Pigs invasion.<sup>(11)</sup> However, he harbored no ill feelings towards anyone at the CIA over the failure.<sup>(12)</sup> In part because of his lack of confidence, and in part because of his feeling that he needed a better way of gaining intelligence, Kennedy instigated a review of the intelligence system. This review, however, was not undertaken to find a way to punish the Agency. Instead, it was a review to attempt to find a way to improve the actions undertaken by the CIA. The failure of the Bay of Pigs prompted Kennedy and his advisors to use more covert operations.<sup>(13)</sup> In fact, covert activities spread to Latin America, the Far East, and Africa.<sup>(14)</sup> In 1975, the Senate Select Committee to Study Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities discovered Kennedy's shocking use of the CIA in Southeast Asia and Cuba.<sup>(15)</sup> After the Bay of Pigs disaster, the Kennedys were more eager than before to use secret, immoral, and illegal activity to bring down the Castro government.<sup>(16)</sup> Kennedy instigated the review as an attempt to get rid of the red tape involved in working with the intelligence community, in hopes of eliminating complications and delaying procedures.<sup>(17)</sup>

Days after the Bay of Pigs failure, Robert Kennedy began to emerge as the President's principal advisor. Robert quickly turned to the CIA to devise a plan to overthrow the Castro regime. A little over 6 months after the Bay of Pigs, the President approved [Operation Mongoose](#). According to CIA notes, Robert Kennedy told the planners of the operation that "the Cuban problem today carried top priority in U.S. Govt. No time, money, effort-or manpower to be spared."<sup>(18)</sup> Mongoose involved four hundred American employees, two thousand Cuban agents, a small navy and air force, and more than fifty business fronts. Their activities included intelligence gathering, minor sabotage, and propaganda. When Operation Mongoose was abandoned because of the Cuban missile crisis, other plans to use the CIA to assassinate Castro were devised.<sup>(19)</sup> In Laos, President Kennedy approved a CIA run, secret war that spread mayhem and death throughout the already torn country.<sup>(20)</sup> In Vietnam, he approved the CIA's most aggressive operations.<sup>(21)</sup> Moral and legal obligations had little or no impact on the covert operations he approved.<sup>(22)</sup>

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When Kennedy was first in office, it was extremely difficult for the President to get accurate information, in large part due to the way President Kennedy, and his brother Attorney General Robert Kennedy, handled the intelligence community. The Kennedys had a habit of not working through the proper channels, resulting in discussions with and information from low-level government workers, individuals unlikely to want to say "no" to the Attorney General or President of the United States. The Kennedys also did not take "no" or "I do not know" for an answer, leaving low-level government workers fumbling for an answer for the President or Attorney General.<sup>(23)</sup> After his review of the intelligence community, the President began to rely more closely than before on his National Security Advisor to provide him with information. This resulted in more accurate information and helped prevent further fiascoes like the Bay of Pigs.<sup>(24)</sup> Changes in the Central Intelligence Agency that resulted from the Bay of Pigs invasion, according to Bissell, emanated from within the CIA, rather than from President Kennedy.

Kennedy's public dissatisfaction with the CIA did not even last long. On November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1961, in a ceremony at CIA headquarters, Kennedy told the Agency:

How grateful we are in the government and in the country for the services that the personnel of this Agency render to the country. It is not always easy. Your successes are unheralded-your failures are trumpeted. I sometimes have that feeling myself. But I am sure you realize how important your work, how essential it is-and how, in the long sweep of history, how significant your efforts will be judged.<sup>(25)</sup>

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Conspiracy books usually treat John and Robert Kennedy as innocent babes who would not have thought about dirty tricks — much less assassination plots — against Castro. But the reality is very different. See:

- [An article by Max Holland](#) that focusses on Bobby Kennedy's attitude toward Castro and the assassination.
- [An article by ARRB member Anna Nelson](#) on recent document releases, including

Then on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1963, in a letter of commendation to Director John McCone, Kennedy expressed his "deep admiration for [their] achievements, and the appreciation of a grateful Nation" to the members of the intelligence community.<sup>(26)</sup> In fact, as late as October 9, 1963, a little less than two months before his death, President Kennedy had the following to say at a news conference about the Central Intelligence Agency:

one "smoking gun" memo that ties JFK to dirty tricks against Castro.

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I can find nothing, and I have looked through the record very carefully over the last nine months, and I could go back further, to indicate that the CIA has done anything but support policy. . . So I think that while the CIA may have made mistakes, as we all do, on different occasions, and has had many successes which may go unheralded, in my opinion in this case [South Vietnam] it is unfair to charge them as they have been charged. I think they have done a good job.<sup>(27)</sup>

The President was thus fully supporting the CIA in front of the nation.

The CIA by that point had also had ample time to improve the President's opinion of the intelligence community. It had done so through its work during such events as the Cuban Missile Crisis. While Kennedy may have had his doubts in 1961, his opinion of the CIA was extremely favorable by late 1963.

President Kennedy was assassinated on November 23, 1963, two and a half years after he threaten to splinter the CIA. Not only did the CIA have ample time to improve the President's opinion of the Agency, it had had ample time to assassinate the President. If Kennedy had not dismantled the CIA within the year, he was never going to dismantle it. In Washington, two and a half years is an eternity and if an agency can survive presidential enmity that long, it no longer has anything to fear.

Although President Kennedy was somewhat dissatisfied with the CIA after the Bay of Pigs invasion, there is no evidence that Kennedy actually wanted to break up the agency at anytime, even when he instituted his reviews. His statement about splintering the CIA was likely made in a moment of frustration with the Bay of Pigs failure. Evidence shows that Kennedy relied more heavily on the CIA and covert operations after the Bay of Pigs. His purpose was to make the agency better. The CIA had survived two and a half years without being reduced or dismantled in any way. On the contrary, Kennedy oversaw one the Agency's largest budget increases in history.<sup>(28)</sup> The evidence shows that by late 1963 the problems between Kennedy and the Central Intelligence Agency was simply water-under-the-bridge. Kennedy had worked over the two years after the Bay of Pigs to make the CIA a more efficient intelligence gathering agency. Any animosity had completely disappeared by 1963.

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4. Weber, Ralph. *Spymasters: Ten CIA Officers in Their Own Words*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Books, 1999. Pg. 22
5. Ibid., Pg. 24
6. Ibid.
7. Reeves, Thomas. *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy*. New York: The Free Press, 1991. Pg. 260
8. Ibid., Pg. 284
9. *Spymasters* Pg. 25
10. Russo, Gus. *Live by the Sword*. Baltimore: Bancroft 1998. Pg. 35
11. *Spymasters* Pg. 69-70

12. Ibid.
13. *Flawed* Pg. 219
14. Zegart, Amy. *Flawed by Design*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. Pg. 189
15. *Question* Pg. 7
16. *Question* Pg. 276
17. Bissell, Richard. *Reflection of a Cold Warrior*. New Haven: Yale University Press 1996. Pg. 198
18. *Question* Pg. 277
19. Ibid., Pg. 277-278
20. Ibid., Pg. 416
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. *Spymasters* Pg. 123
24. *Flawed* Pg. 105
25. *"Our First Line of Defense": Presidential Reflections on US Intelligence*. Central Intelligence Agency Center for the Study of Intelligence. January 1996. Pg. 25
26. Ibid., Pg. 26
27. Ibid., Pg. 27
28. *Live* Pg. 35

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