



Kennedy blamed himself for letting the CIA invade despite misgivings.

invasion, but also how the still-green President John F. Kennedy scrambled to keep the U.S. from entering into a full conflict with Cuba.

The disclosure is the handiwork of the dogged researcher Peter Kornbluh and his Washington-based National Security Archive. The right-to-know group used the Freedom of Information Act and lawsuits to force the CIA to release all its major documents on Kennedy's failed efforts to overthrow Castro, who this month turned 85 and stands as a living reminder of America's failure to repel communism on an island just 90 miles from Florida.

Written by then-CIA chief historian Jack Pfeiffer between 1974 and 1984, the five-volume history—the last volume of which remains classified—seeks to spread the blame beyond the agency to the State Department and White House, while confirming that the invasion was even more disastrously handled than previously known.

Among the details hidden from public view all these years are that a CIA official transferred funds from the invasion budget to “pay the mafia types” for an assassination plot against Castro, which was so secret that the chief of invasion planning, Jacob Esterline, was not told what the money was for. Despite repeated White House instructions to keep U.S. forces from directly participating in order to preserve plausible deniability of American involvement, the CIA ultimately gave permission for U.S. pilots to fly aircraft over the beaches. The aviators were told that, if they were shot down and captured, they should describe themselves as mercenaries and the U.S. would “deny any knowledge” of them. Sadly, four U.S. airmen lost their lives, and it wasn't until 1976 that they were given medals in ceremonies their families were encouraged to keep secret. Before Kennedy inherited the Bay of Pigs invasion plan from the Eisenhower administration, then-vice president Richard Nixon was a forceful advocate

HISTORY

The Untold Story of the Bay of Pigs

Newly declassified CIA documents reveal new blunders and how close America came to war during the failed invasion of Cuba.

BY ROBERT DALLEK

FROM A TRANSPORT ship floating in Cuba's Bay of Pigs, CIA operative Grayston Lynch knew the U.S. mission to overthrow Fidel Castro was faltering. The Cuban exiles he had brought with him had abandoned their posts, so he grabbed the boat's recoilless rifles and machine guns and began firing at the aircraft overhead.

On a day of chaos and infamy in April 1961, Lynch would soon understand the consequences of his shooting. He had fired on his agency's own planes, which were trying to protect the U.S.-led Cuban exiles invading the island from

being slaughtered by Castro's forces. “We couldn't tell them from the Castro planes,” Lynch later explained.

The Bay of Pigs is one of America's most infamous Cold War blunders, and it has been studied, debated, and dramatized endlessly ever since. Yet, for 50 years, details like Lynch's story were hidden away in top-secret CIA files that were finally released this month and reviewed by NEWSWEEK.

The CIA's official history of the Bay of Pigs operation is filled with dramatic and harrowing details that not only lay bare the strategic, logistical, and political problems that doomed the

The CIA had a “must-go list” of 11 Cuban officials, including Fidel Castro (right), his brother, Raul, and Che Guevara.

of bringing down Castro and urged the CIA to support “goon squads and other direct action groups” operating inside and outside Cuba.

Perhaps most disturbing of all, the CIA task force in charge of the paramilitary assault did not believe it could succeed without becoming an open invasion supported by the U.S. military. The assessment was part of a brief prepared for President-elect Kennedy that he never saw. Kennedy later told one of his aides that the CIA and military did not believe he would resist their pressure to have American forces engage when the invasion was on the verge of failure.

Pfeiffer’s revelations are buried in a lengthy, comprehensive, and argumentative history. The volumes, which include 1,200 pages of narrative and documentary appendices, describe the White House, and particularly Kennedy, as responsible for the embarrassing defeat: It cost the invaders more than 100 lives, gave communists around the world a propaganda coup, and made a mockery of Kennedy’s promise of a new day in relations with Latin America.

In public, Kennedy put on a bold show of confidence, accepting that he alone was responsible. But in private, he struggled to make sense of the catastrophe: “How could I have been so stupid as to let them proceed?” he repeatedly asked his aides. He was furious at the CIA for having misled him. Waiting several months before he compelled CIA Director Allen Dulles to resign, Kennedy told him, “Under a parliamentary system of government it is I who would be leaving. But under our system it is you who must go.”

In the CIA history, Pfeiffer sought to aggressively defend the agency against two earlier assessments: a Kennedy presidential commission headed by Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Maxwell Taylor and including Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and the report of the CIA’s inspector general, Lyman Kirkpatrick.



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In Pfeiffer’s judgment, the CIA got a “bum rap” from the Taylor-RFK report for a “political decision that ensured the military defeat of the anti-Castro forces.” That decision was Kennedy’s refusal to use U.S. air power to support the invasion or to save it once it became clear it was headed for defeat. Pfeiffer argued it was absurd for Kennedy to think that he could hide America’s role in the invasion. “The U.S. government’s plan to maintain plausible deniability of its anti-Castro involvement had the impenetrability of the emperor’s new clothes,” he wrote. Hence, Kennedy’s own subsequent self-recrimination about being “stupid.” He could not forget his pre-invasion conversation with Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who asked how many men were invading and how many men Castro could field against them. Kennedy replied, perhaps 1,500 invaders and 25,000 opponents. Acheson marveled at Kennedy’s naiveté: “It doesn’t take Price Waterhouse to figure out that fifteen hundred aren’t as good as twenty-five thousand,” he said.

Kirkpatrick asserted that the CIA’s poor “planning, organization, staffing, and management” were the principal reasons for the failure. Specifically, the agency’s uncertainty that an invasion would “trigger an uprising,” which it considered essential to the success of the operation, and numerous leaks alerting Castro to the coming attack should have persuaded Dulles and Deputy Director for Plans Richard Bissell, Kirkpatrick said, to ask Kennedy to call it off. Also, the refusal to accept Kennedy’s word that he would not use American forces to prevent a failure made the CIA the responsible party.

The debate over who was to blame for the Bay of Pigs is a perfect example of what the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl meant when he said, “History is argument without end.” But it is well to revisit this disaster not to assign blame anew but to recall John Quincy Adams’s cautionary advice: America “does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.” **NW**