

A Presidential Decision – The Bay of Pigs

Introduction & National History Standards

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Grade Level: Middle/High

Duration of lesson: 1-2 periods

Overview:

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy faced the consequences of a failed coup in Cuba, which his government had secretly organized. The C.I.A. had trained and equipped 1,400 anti-Castro Cuban exiles to lead an insurrection on the island by sea, air, and land. But, owing to a series of snafus and miscalculations, “Operation Pluto” (as it was called) was a bloody failure. Seeing that “plausible deniability” had become untenable, Kennedy claimed responsibility for the failure and faced the American public and the United Nations armed only with his words. Under the pressures of the Cold War and hawkish advisors, the President had decided to do anything and everything to thwart the spread of communism in the Americas. The debacle at the Bay of Pigs served to strengthen Castro’s grip on power and Cuban relations with the Soviet Union.

Using a variety of historical sources, students will analyze the causes and consequences of the attempted coup, and discuss possible alternative courses of action that (under the circumstances) Kennedy could have taken. In the process, students will familiarize themselves with the fears and dangers that characterized the Cold War.

Related [National History Standards](#):

Content Standards:

Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)

Standard 2: How the Cold War and conflicts in Korea and Vietnam influenced domestic and international politics

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

- A. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
- B. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- B. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions.
- D. Consider multiple perspectives.

Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities

- A. Formulate historical questions.
- C. Interrogate historical data.
- D. Identify the gaps in the available records, marshal contextual knowledge and perspectives of the time and place, and construct a sound historical interpretation.

Standard 5: Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making

- A.** Identify issues and problems in the past.
- B.** Marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances and contemporary factors contributing to problems and alternative courses of action.
- D.** Evaluate alternative courses of action.
- E.** Formulate a position or course of action on an issue.
- F.** Evaluate the implementation of a decision.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will identify factors that impacted the relationship between Cuba and the United States.
- Students will evaluate the impact of the decision to invade Cuba on U.S.-Cuban relations, Presidential support and the presidential decision-making process.

Topic Background

On April 17, 1961, 1400 United States trained and equipped Cuban exiles landed on a beachhead in the Bay of Pigs, Cuba. Their mission involved inciting an insurrection amongst the Cuban people against Communist leader Fidel Castro. The United States, fearing retribution from the Soviets, took great measures to conceal their involvement in the invasion. However, the ill-conceived CIA plan proved disastrous, with the exiles facing defeat just seventy-two hours after the mission began.

The blame for the failed invasion fell on the shoulders of John F. Kennedy, who just four months prior, took office as the 35th President of the United States. When Kennedy realized that “plausible deniability” no longer held any promise, he quickly took responsibility for his actions. He commented, “There’s an old saying that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan. I am the responsible officer of government” (Kornbluh, 3). In another exchange with special counsel Theodore C. Sorensen, he questioned, “How could I have been so stupid as to let them go ahead” (Wyden, 7)? What indeed caused Kennedy to pursue the covert operation, when, as the historical record indicates, many of his advisers presented serious concerns regarding the probability of success, while maintaining “plausible deniability” for United States involvement?

In January 1961, Kennedy inherited an increasingly tense and hostile foreign policy situation from out-going President Eisenhower. The United States and Soviet Union continued a suspicious and tension-filled relationship, especially due recent developments in the space race (landing of *Sputnik*) and the embarrassing U-2 spy incident. Throughout the Election of 1960, he portrayed himself as a “Cold War Warrior.” Taking a hard-liner’s stand on foreign policy, he criticized his opponent Vice-President Nixon for the Eisenhower administration’s ignorance of the increasingly pro-Communist regime of Castro in nearby Cuba. He believed the United States should “attempt to strengthen the non-Batista democratic anti-Castro forces in exile, and in Cuba itself, who offer eventual hope of overthrowing Castro” and worried that “these fighters for freedom have had virtually no support from our government.” Furthermore, Kennedy characterized Eisenhower’s approach as dangerous to winning the wider war on communism, claiming, “Those who say they will stand up to Khrushchev have not demonstrated any ability to stand up to Mr. Castro” (Triay, 12). Even in his inaugural address, Kennedy clearly outlined his position on the communist threat, “Let every nation know that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty” (Inaugural Address).

Perhaps it appeared that Eisenhower and Nixon largely ignored happenings in Cuba, but unbeknownst to Kennedy, the former administration had been taking steps to intervene more directly yet covertly. Throughout 1959 and 1960, Castro’s regime systematically and consistently restricted civil and personal liberties, purged the government of those with anti-communist sentiment, seized American property and businesses and promoted anti-American attitudes. In January 1960, diplomatic efforts stalled with the resignation of Fresquet, the remaining liberal in Castro’s regime, and when further diplomatic efforts failed, CIA Director Allen Dulles and Eisenhower met to discuss the contingency plans the CIA had been developing throughout 1960. A report

entitled, "A Program of Covert Action against Castro Regime," explained various aspects of the plan, including the development of a "political front in exile," an extensive anti-Communism, pro-democratic propaganda campaign, "covert intelligence and action organized within Cuba," and "bringing together a paramilitary force outside of Cuba" for the purposes of inciting a popular insurrection against Castro. In addition, the OAS (Organization of American States) applied economic pressure through sanctions and embargos. Finally, Eisenhower authorized \$13 million and Department of Defense personnel and equipment to support what came to be called Operation Pluto (Triay, 5-8). Essentially, the operation called for the training and equipping of a small army of exiles, "comprised of students, workers, former Castro supporters, former army personnel, professionals, rich, poor and middle class." After landing in the Bay of Pigs, the exiles planned to capture and secure a beachhead from which to operate a provisional democratic government. While the United States committed to planning, training and equipping personnel for Operation Pluto, it also sought "plausible deniability" so that if the invasion failed the United States could deny involvement.

On January 19, 1961, Kennedy met with Eisenhower regarding the Cuban situation. Considering election rhetoric criticizing the Eisenhower administration's position on Cuba, the hard-line tone of Eisenhower's advice to Kennedy was somewhat surprising. Democrat Clark Clifford described the tone of the meeting in the following memorandum, "President Eisenhower said with reference to guerilla forces which are opposed to Castro that it was the policy of this government to help such forces to the utmost. At the present time, we are helping train anti-Castro forces in Guatemala. It was his recommendation that this effort be continued and accelerated." Another memo, written by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, stated, "President Eisenhower stated in the long run the United States cannot allow the Castro Government to continue to exist in Cuba"(White,15). Since Cuba proved to be a key election issue, Kennedy and his team began taking action immediately.

On January 28, 1961, JFK and his advisers discussed various options for dealing with Cuba. Discussion focused on how the "United States has undertaken a number of covert measures against Castro, including propaganda, sabotage, political action, and direct assistance to anti-Castro Cubans in military training." In addition, these men discussed "a particularly urgent question" regarding "the use to be made of a group of . . . Cubans now in training in Guatemala, who cannot remain indefinitely where they are." All agreed that overt military action placed the United States in a compromising position in the international community and that any "overt military action not authorized and supported by the Organization of American States" jeopardized the United State political position in the international arena. As a result, Kennedy authorized a continuance of CIA activities on the island, the development of a plan "for the active deployment of anti-Castro Cuban forces", creation of State Department proposals "to isolate the Castro regime and to bring against it the judgment of the Organization of American States." Most importantly, the president desired that the United States remained opposed to "Communist penetration of the American Republics" but not opposed to "democratic social revolution and economic reform." Finally, Kennedy cautioned that "no hint of these discussion reach any personnel beyond those most immediately concerned within the Executive Branch." (White, 16-17).

Throughout February and March, the President continued to meet regularly with advisers regarding the deployment of the exile army. As early as February 8, 1961, several high-level State Department officials voiced their concerns regarding the plan. On March 31, Under Secretary Chester Bowles identified some of his concerns. He feared foremost, that the covert action violated “the fundamental obligations we assumed. . .in establishing the Organization of American States.” The act prohibited the United States (or any state) to “intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of any other State.” Bowles worried that any United States interference would be received poorly in the international community. Furthermore, if the plan failed, and Bowles believed there was a high likelihood that it would, Castro’s position would be strengthened and his control over the island consolidated. Furthermore, relations between the Soviet Union and Cuba stood to deepen (White, 22-24). On April 10, Arthur J. Schlesinger, special counsel to the president, warned that the plan, as it stood, held little chance of success.

Despite these warnings, Kennedy, after making several changes to the plan to conceal United States involvement, authorized the invasion, along with an air strike to target key Cuban airfields. Unfortunately, a second air assault planned for the morning of April 17, one the CIA deemed essential to the integrity of the mission, was cancelled due to a difficult diplomatic and political situation arising at the United Nations. As the UN considered Cuba’s complaint of “various plans of aggression and acts of intervention” by the United States, the Cuban exiles were in fact initiating United States intervention in Cuba’s affairs.

The CIA modeled its Cuban operation after the successful strategy it employed in Guatemala. Since inciting a popular revolt against Castro stood as the ultimate goal, the initial phase of the operation included an extensive radio propagand campaign. Just hours before the land invasion commenced, Radio Swan encouraged Cubans to “take up strategic positions that control roads and railroads. . .See that no Fidelist planes take off” (Wyden, 208). The second phase of the operation involved air-strikes, launched from Guatemala. Each Cuban pilot received detailed instructions regarding one of three major targets, and one pilot, whose mission required a landing in Miami, Florida, received a briefing regarding his cover story. When he landed the cover story quickly fell to pieces as newspaper reporters took his photograph and confirmed that he had not, in fact, defected from Cuba, but had instead intentionally sabotaged his own plane. Two other pilots missed their initial targets and instead of making two bombing runs, they made a total of five. With each passing moment the goal of “plausible deniability” grew out of reach.

A land invasion, constituted the third prong of the operation. Even before the land invasion proper began, the exiles struggled with second thoughts. For example, some wondered how they would be supplied with ammunition once they landed on the beachhead. Others voiced concern about the swampy conditions that awaited them at the landing site. Despite these concerns, preparations for the invasion moved forward (Wyden, 208).

From the outset, the exiles faced the consequences of miscalculation and poor timing. “Frogmen” encountered enemy fire as soon as they stepped foot on shore. Gray Lynch, the CIA agent in charge of the amphibious incursion, received word from Washington around 1 a.m. that “Castro still has operational aircraft. Expect you to be

hit at dawn. Unload all troops and supplies and take ships to sea as soon as possible.” Under the assumption that Castro’s air-strike capabilities would be destroyed by United States air support, he ordered the remainder of the battalion ashore. Little known to Lynch and the men under his command, the United States cancelled the second air-strike due to political reasons. Unfortunately, the lack of air support carried with it similar consequences for the air invasion. Captain Eddie Ferrer encountered enemy fire shortly after he dropped 177 paratroopers over the beachhead. The approach of a “Castro B-26” surprised him as “the American advisers had said that the sky would be theirs.” Ferrer’s survival proved miraculous since he flew an unarmed plane. In addition, to this key tactical error, the exiles found themselves without other means of support such as supplies (Wyden, 215-218).

In addition, the CIA misjudged the strength of Cuban opposition to Castro. According to Philip W. Bonsal, the last American ambassador to Cuba, “They [the CIA and Kennedy administration] underestimated the fanaticism and combative spirit of those who supported Castro unconditionally. The notion that this support would melt away and that tens of thousands of Cubans would defect or refuse to fight if the hundred of Castro’s opponents, who the United States had armed and trained, obtained an initial success, was simply wishful thinking” (Wyden, 327).

When the exiles hit the shores of Cuba, they quickly succumbed to defeat in just seventy-two hours, especially due to the lack of United States promised air support. With each obstacle encountered, the operation ran “further and further behind schedule.” and just as quickly the “cover-story for the attack. . .fell apart within hours, but not before United States Ambassador to the UN, Adlai Stevenson, had presented the false account to the entire General Assembly” (Kornbluh, 3). As a result, the United States suffered terrible diplomatic and political embarrassment in the international community.

The long-term consequences of the failed invasion, however, proved far more damaging and dangerous to United States security and foreign relations. First, the Cuban exiles which survived the invasion found themselves abandoned in a hostile environment. Furthermore, and quite ironically, the very contingencies the United States hoped to avoid in a successful overthrow of Castro became nightmarish realities. Shortly after the invasion, Castro committed himself fully to Communist ideology and the relationship between Cuba and the Soviets deepened considerably. Just one year later, the world held its breath, sitting on the brink of nuclear war as Kennedy and the Soviets negotiated the Cuban missile crisis.

In the midst of the Cold War crisis, Kennedy pursued a hard-line, anti-communist foreign policy, one that propelled the United States to intervene in Cuba for better or worse. Why did Kennedy pursue a covert operation which many of his advisers cautioned strongly against? Perhaps, even he struggled to find a concrete explanation beyond the real fear that should Castro continue to rule communism stood knocking at the United States’ backdoor.

Annotated Bibliography:

Kornbluh, Peter. *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba*. New York: The New Press, 1998.

Bay of Pigs Declassified offers a thorough documentary history of the Bay of Pigs incident. Included is an introductory essay which traces the incidents historical antecedents, its inception, its failure, and the consequences of failure.

Triay, Victor Andres. *Bay of Pigs: An Oral History of Brigade 2506*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001.

Triay takes a different approach to the standard retelling of the Bay of Pigs incident. His collection of oral histories offers the perspective of the Cuban exiles trained to carry out the clandestine mission. This account stands in stark contrast to the typical political history treatments most commonly found.

White, Mark J. *The Kennedys and Cuba: The Declassified Documentary History*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999.

White presents a complete documentary of the Kennedys' relationship with Cuba. Topics include the Bay of Pigs, Operation Mongoose, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. A one to two sentence introduction precedes each document, with longer contextual essays preceding each chapter.

Vocabulary

Covert Military Operation: An activity meant to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly.

Teaching Procedures

1. Prior to beginning the lesson assign Resource Sheet #1, "Presidential Brief: The Situation in Cuba," for student reading. (Additional information from the CHOICES Project on the Cold War relationship with Cuba can be obtained at http://www.choices.edu/curriculum_unit.cfm?id=15.)

After reading the text have students complete the first portion, *Presidential Brief*, of Resource Sheet #2, "Presidential Decision-Making: JFK and the Bay of Pigs."

2. As a motivational activity, project a current political cartoon depicting a recent presidential decision. Debrief the motivation by asking students to share their responses. Next ask:

Who gets the praise or blame when the U.S. government makes a good decision? A poor decision?

Explain to students that today they will be discussing presidential decision-making and the many factors presidents must consider in the decision-making process by examining the President Kennedy's decision regarding a covert invasion of Cuba.

3. To establish historical context for the Bay of Pigs incident, review students' answers to Questions #1-5 on Resource Sheet #2. Ask:

Why did Cuba and the rise of Castro become a focus of U.S. foreign policy?

How does the Cuban situation fit into the context of Cold War foreign policy?

Why was the Kennedy administration concerned about Cuba's relationship with the Soviet Union?

What are some of the benefits/consequences that might be achieved by successful execution of the CIA planned invasion of Cuba?

Project **Resource Sheet 2** and review with students the key components of the CIA planned invasion of Cuba.

4. Prepare students for a simulation by assigning 1-2 students to assume the role of President Kennedy. The remainder of students should be divided into three groups representing the different perspectives of Kennedy's advisers: each group should receive their appropriate resource sheet.

President Kennedy – Resource Sheet #3, "President Kennedy: To Invade or Not to Invade?" and Resource Sheet #5, "President John F. Kennedy on Cuba"

State Department – Resource Sheet #4, “Advising President Kennedy,” and Resource Sheet #6, “Memorandum From the Under Secretary of State (Bowles) to Secretary of State Rusk, March 31, 1961”

United States Ambassador to the Soviet Union – Resource Sheet #4, “Advising President Kennedy,” and Resource Sheet #7, “Telegram from U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union Llewellyn E. Thompson to the Department of State”

Central Intelligence Agency – Resource Sheet #4, “Advising President Kennedy,” and Resource Sheet #8, “Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, January 19, 1961 (Planning an invasion of Cuba)”

Explain to students that they will read primary source documents to prepare for a meeting with the president. The advisers should prepare to persuade the president to accept their position regarding the CIA’s operation in Cuba. The president will read primary source documents to determine where Kennedy stood on Cuba, the Cold War and the Soviets prior to the meeting with his advisors. Students should complete Resource Sheets #4 (Advisers) and Resource Sheet #3 (Kennedy) as they read their assigned documents.

Conduct the presidential advisers meeting. During the meeting, each group should present their arguments to the President. As each group presents, students should complete Resource Sheet #9, “Evaluating the Options: A Conversation with the President.” The president should have an opportunity to ask questions of each group following the presentation. Ask:

What kinds of arguments are presented to President Kennedy? Do the arguments tend to be more pro-invasion, anti-invasion or are arguments for and against presented in equal numbers?

Were any important advantages or disadvantages regarding the invasion not presented to President Kennedy?

Is President Kennedy placed at an advantage or disadvantage in the decision-making process by the arguments that are/are not presented to him?

5. The President should share his/her decision with the class. Debrief with the following questions:

Poll the class. Do they agree or disagree with President? Why or why not?

What arguments received the greatest emphasis/weight in the decision-making process?

What arguments should the president have given greater consideration?

6. Share with students the actual decision and subsequent consequences. Consult the content narrative and focus students on reasons for the failure of the invasion, such as the lack of promised U.S. military, poor strategic planning, and the Kennedy administration's insistence of maintaining "plausible deniability" at all costs. Students should record this decision on the bottom of Resource Sheet #9. Ask:

Why do you think President Kennedy chose to invade Cuba? Do you think he made the right decision?

What impact does this decision and subsequent failure of the invasion have on Cold War relations between the U.S. and Cuba, between Cuba and the Soviets, and between the U.S. and the Soviets?

7. As a tool to assess students distribute Resource Sheet #10, "JFK and the Bay of Pigs: A Political Cartoon," and have students develop a political cartoon according to the instructions provided.
8. An extension activity could include having students research another presidential decision and identify the various factors/arguments the president needed to consider in making his decision. In addition, students should evaluate the outcome of the decision and explain why they agree or disagreed with the president's decision. Students should share their research with the class in a 5 minute oral presentation.

Primary Source Annotation

Kennedy Election Statements

The first primary source document (**Resource Sheet #5**) is a series of statements John F. Kennedy made during the 1960 presidential election campaign. These statements provide students with an overview of Kennedy's Cold War foreign policy approach and enable them to enter the advisers meeting with a satisfactory understanding of the historical context surrounding the Bay of Pigs incident. In addition, three press conferences with President Kennedy give students a glimpse at the official position on Cuba the administration presented to the American people in the early months of 1961. The Election statements can be found at

<http://www.historyofcuba.com/history/baypigs/jfk-1.htm>. Press Conference 1 can be found at http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfk_press_conference_610208.html.

Press Conference 3 can be found at

http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfk_press_conference_610215.html, and Press Conference 9 can be found at http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfk_press_conference_610412.html.

Memorandum From the Under Secretary of State (Bowles) to Secretary of State Rusk, March 31, 1961

The second primary source document (**Resource Sheet #6**) is a memo written by Under Secretary of State Bowles to Secretary of State Rusk. In the memo, date March 31, 1961, Bowles outlines several reservations regarding the operation's success and the consequences of a failed operation. In addition, he expresses grave concerns regarding the ability of the U.S. to deny its involvement. This source may be accessed at <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/baypig6.htm>. Its original holding locations are: U.S., Department of State, *FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1961-1963*, Volume X, Cuba, 1961-1962 and Yale University, *Bowles Papers*, Box 300, Mansfield, Folder 536.

Telegram from U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union Llewellyn E. Thompson to the Department of State

The third primary source (**Resource Sheet #7**) is a memo from Ambassador to the Soviet Union to the Department of State. Dated April 1, 1961, the memo indicates that Khrushchev is aware of U.S. plans to intervene in Cuba. In addition, the Ambassador explains how he assures Khrushchev that the U.S. is not planning to intervene. This source may be found on pages 24 - 25 in Mark J. White's book, entitled *The Kennedy's and Cuba*.

Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, January 19, 1961. (Planning an invasion of Cuba)

The fourth and final primary source (**Resource Sheet #8**) utilized in this lesson is a memo written by the CIA. Dated January 19, 1961, it outlines several reasons for the

covert operation such as the fear that Castro will export communism to other Latin American nations and that support for Castro within Cuban continues to strengthen. This source can be retrieved at <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/baypig2.htm>. Its original holding location is U.S. Department of State, *FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1961-1963*, Volume X, Cuba, 1961-1962.