LESSONS IN DISASTER

McGEORGE BUNDY AND THE PATH TO WAR IN VIETNAM

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In February 1961, just weeks after the president's inauguration, Bundy presented Kennedy with two papers on the proposed invasion. The first was from CIA deputy director Richard Bissell, a Groton graduate and Yale economics professor whom Bundy had known and been friendly with for years. Bissell had been one of the principal architects of the overthrow in 1954 of Guatemala's president, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, in a coup that had been actively lobbied for by the United Fruit Company. As he developed his plans for the exile invasion at the Bay of Pigs, Bissell had reassembled members of his Guatemala team, including the future Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt.[17]

The second memo Bundy presented to Kennedy was from Thomas C. Mann, the recent assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs and the new administration's ambassador to Mexico. In a cover memo to the president, Bundy called Bissell and Mann the "real antagonists at the staff level" on the invasion debate. Bissell, who aspired to succeed Allen Dulles as the head of the CIA, was the intelligence community's champion of Operation Zapata and managed its planning. Mann, who was not part of the intelligence apparatus, was highly dubious of the overthrow plot. He questioned the causal logic of the regime change scenario, doubting that an invasion by the small expatriate force would actually become the catalyst for a vast popular uprising across Cuba.[18]

Bundy was inclined to accept Bissell's sanguine projections. "Defense and CIA now feel quite enthusiastic about the invasion," he reported to President Kennedy in early February. "At the worst, they think the invaders would get into the mountains, and at the best, they think they might get a full-fledged civil war in which we could then back the anti-Castro forces openly."[19] Washington's support for the exiles, however, was already widely known, and rumors about Zapata quickly mutated

into noisy media stories. On January 10, 1961, the *New York Times* had run a front-page article with the not-so-covert headline "U.S. Helps Train an Anti-Castro Force at Secret Guatemalan Base." The New York *Daily News* was reporting "35,000 saboteurs ready to strike from within. 6000 Cuban patriots ready to storm ashore."[20]

Bundy received private expressions of caution about Operation Zapata from his own colleagues. The young presidential aide Richard Goodwin anticipated the United States would fall into an untenable trap. "Even if the landings are successful and a revolutionary government is set up," he told Bundy, "they'll have to ask for our help. And if we agree, it'll be a massacre. . . . We'll have to fight house-to-house in Havana." Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who had also come to Washington from Cambridge to serve as an assistant to the president, sent Bundy a pair of memos opposing the invasion. "I am against it," he bluntly declared.[21]

Despite these pointed internal critiques of Operation Zapata—Goodwin's heresies so annoyed the national security adviser that the young speechwriter was banished from White House meetings on Cuba—Bundy continued to support the CIA plot.[22] In mid-March he told President Kennedy the agency had done "a remarkable job of reframing the landing plan so as to make it unspectacular and quiet, and plausibly Cuban in its essentials. I have been a skeptic about Bissell's operation, but now I think we are on the edge of a good answer."[23] Central questions nonetheless remained unaddressed. How probable was it that the exiles could stimulate a wider national revolt? How large would an uprising need to be to overwhelm Castro's state security forces? If the invasion failed to stimulate a popular revolt, how long and how effectively could a force of 1,300 Cuban exile soldiers fight Castro's much larger army? Was there any real evidence to support Bissell's claim that the exile force could sustain itself indefinitely? What were the military risks and potential contingencies associated with the invasion, including the potential need for American air support? In light of the rumors and the media reports, had operational security

already been fatally compromised? The documentary record does not reflect any effort by Bundy to evaluate and mitigate these concerns.

On April 7, 1961, Schlesinger made a final appeal to the national security adviser. "Dick Goodwin and I met for breakfast to see whether it would be worth making one more try to reverse the decision," Schlesinger wrote in his journal. "But Bundy and Rostow joined us and discouraged our efforts."[24] Walt Rostow, who had been appointed as Bundy's deputy, was another academic talent recruited to the Kennedy administration. A former Rhodes Scholar and a Yale PhD who had taught economic history at Cambridge, Oxford, Columbia, and most recently the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Rostow had a reputation as a bellicose anticommunist.[25] "He is absolutely interminable," said Bundy of Rostow's relentless hawkishness. His "view of the world . . . is always complete, three-dimensional, graphic and wrong."[26]

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