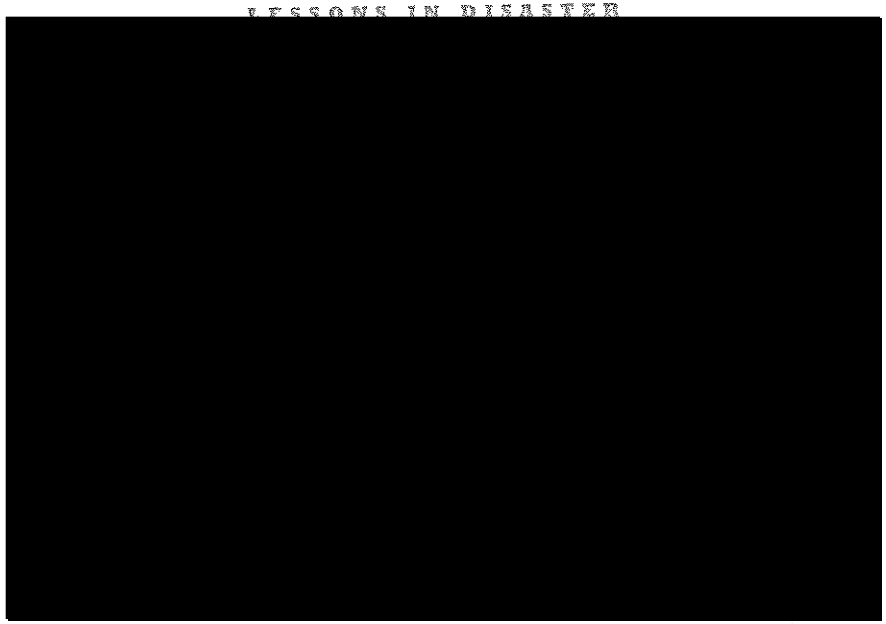

On Monday morning, April 17, 1961, the 1,300 members of the Cuban exile brigade landed on the beaches of the Bay of Pigs on Cuba's southwestern coast. Fighting with its back to the ocean and already infiltrated by Castro's agents, the exile brigade was outnumbered and outmaneuvered. Within a day it was surrounded by 20,000 Cuban troops. There were no stirrings of a spontaneous popular revolt that would sweep across Cuba. And in a stunningly inept lapse in planning, the exile force soon realized that eighty miles of swamp blocked its escape route into the mountains.[27] A crushing defeat was imminent.

As the grim reports poured into the White House, Rostow drove to CIA headquarters to meet with Bissell, his former professor, who was haggard, unshaven, and panicked. As the journalist and historian David Talbot notes, President Kennedy had insisted throughout the planning for the invasion that he would not intervene militarily to salvage the operation, at one point sending a military aide to the exiles' Central American training camp to reiterate that the U.S. Marines would not come to their rescue.[28] As Rostow met with Bissell and his aides, however, he soon

realized that the CIA planners did not believe Kennedy would continue to withhold American military support if the success of the operation was imperiled. Such an outcome, Rostow later wrote, "was inconceivable to them."[29]

Rostow urged Bissell to make one final appeal to the president. A meeting was convened for shortly before midnight. As Talbot recounts, President Kennedy, Vice President Johnson, Secretary of State Rusk, and Secretary of Defense McNamara were all returning from a formal reception in the East Room, dressed in white tie and tails. They were joined by General Lyman Lemnitzer, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Admiral Arleigh Burke, the chief of naval operations. Bissell, "acutely aware of the desperation of those whose lives were on the line," as he later recalled, made a passionate case for intervention.

"Let me take two jets and shoot down the enemy aircraft," he implored the president.

Kennedy refused, reminding Bissell and Burke that he had consistently insisted that no American military forces would be deployed to salvage the invasion. A heated exchange ensued. Burke grew angry. He pressed the president for just one destroyer, which would be sufficient to "knock the hell out of Castro's tanks."

"What if Castro's forces return the fire and hit the destroyer?" Kennedy asked.

"Then we'll knock the hell out of them!" the admiral promised.

"Burke, I don't want the United States involved in this," admonished Kennedy.

"Hell, Mr. President," retorted Burke, "but we *are* involved!"[30]

Bundy presented President Kennedy with a dire recitation of the facts on the afternoon of Tuesday, April 18: "The Cuban armed forces are stronger, the popular response is weaker, and our tactical position is feebler than we had hoped. Tanks have done in one beachhead, and the position is precarious at the others. . . . The real question is whether to reopen the

possibility of further intervention and support or to accept the high probability that our people, at best, will go into the mountains in defeat."[31] Kennedy did not waver. He refused to authorize the "further intervention" raised in Bundy's memo. The operation was doomed. "The secret hope of the leaders of the CIA," Bundy later acknowledged, was to pressure the president into reversing his position, a fact Bissell conceded in his memoirs.[32] "It wasn't in Bissell's mind that he was tricking the president," Bundy told me. "It was that Bissell was the inheritor of legitimacy who thought he knew what the national interest would require and what *any* president would see when the issue was sharply presented."[33]

Kennedy had anticipated Bissell's attempted manipulation. "They were sure I'd give in to them and send the go-ahead order to the *Essex*," Kennedy told his confidant Dave Powers. "They couldn't believe that a new president like me wouldn't panic and try to save his own face. Well they had me figured all wrong."[34] In 2005 a government document surfaced that confirmed the CIA expectation that the Bay of Pigs invasion would fail without direct American military support. The intelligence memorandum, dated November 15, 1960, concluded that an invasion would be "unachievable, except as joint Agency/DOD action"—in other words, a dual invasion conducted by both the CIA and the Department of Defense.[35] But this conclusion was never shared with the White House.

By the end of the week, 114 Cuban exile fighters had been killed and 1,189 had been captured. American responsibility for the operation was quickly exposed, humiliating the Kennedy administration and prompting a wave of global condemnation.[36] The debacle ensured that Kennedy and his top military advisers would never have confidence in one another again. "Pulling out the rug," General Lemnitzer later remarked, was "unbelievable . . . absolutely reprehensible, almost criminal."

For his part, Kennedy was determined not to repeat his mistakes, assuring Arthur Schlesinger Jr. that he would never again be "overawed by

professional military advice." Speaking to his friend Red Fay, whom he had appointed assistant secretary of the navy, Kennedy insisted, "Nobody is going to force me to do anything I don't think is in the best interests of the country." The president added: "We're not going to plunge into an irresponsible action just because a fanatical fringe in this country puts so-called national pride above national reason."[37] Kennedy made a similar point to Schlesinger, dismissing the notion that American prestige would suffer if the cause of the Cuban rebels was not once more embraced. "What is prestige?" asked the president. "Is it the shadow of power or the substance of power? We are going to work on the substance of power. No doubt we will be kicked in the ass for the next couple of weeks, but that won't affect the main business."[38]