

Reexamining Joint Chiefs of Staff Involvement in the Bay of Pigs

A Monograph

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14. ABSTRACT This monograph set out to determine whether the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) really failed to meet President Kennedy's expectations during the Bay of Pigs because they failed to meet their responsibilities, which is often the historical criticism. The author used multiple historical accounts and available primary source documents to compare JCS responsibilities with their actions during the Bay of Pigs. This paper concluded that the JCS met their responsibilities, but failed to meet Kennedy's expectations because his expectations were unrealistic. First, the JCS understood and met their roles and responsibilities based on their experiences under President Eisenhower. Second, President Kennedy discouraged direct and candid advice from his JCS. Finally, it was unrealistic to expect that the JCS could thoroughly review the Central Intelligence Agency's plans for the Bay of Pigs. The JCS' limited role in covert operations and Kennedy's decision-making prevented it. The Bay of Pigs highlights the importance of direct and candid communication between the President and his JCS, and reaffirms inclusion of the JCS in any undertaking with military ramifications. These are the two principal lessons of JCS involvement in the Bay of Pigs.					
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Abstract

Reexamining Joint Chiefs of Staff Involvement in the Bay of Pigs, by LTC David W. Gardner, USA, 45 pages.

The accepted historical view of Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) involvement in the Bay of Pigs is that the JCS failed to meet President Kennedy's expectations during the Bay of Pigs because they did not meet their responsibilities. Kennedy's supporters advanced this criticism immediately following the Bay of Pigs. Their criticisms may have been manifestations of their biases and historians may have obscured important issues by perpetuating their inaccuracies. For these reasons, the accepted historical view based on these criticisms may be inaccurate. Did the JCS really fail to meet President Kennedy's expectations because they failed to meet their responsibilities?

Because Kennedy did not have the opportunity to define his expectations for JCS advice before the Bay of Pigs, it is likely the JCS did not change how they interacted with the President. Therefore, it was necessary to begin the examination of the JCS performance by examining JCS responsibilities under President Eisenhower, and then to analyze JCS actions leading to the Bay of Pigs to determine whether those actions demonstrated that the JCS understood their responsibilities. Next, it was necessary to review Kennedy's interactions with the JCS during invasion planning to determine how these interactions may have shaped JCS actions. Finally, it was necessary to evaluate JCS reviews of the invasion plans for the Bay of Pigs in order to determine whether the critic's charge that the JCS did not adequately study the Bay of Pigs plan is justified.

Ultimately, the evidence indicates the JCS met their responsibilities, but failed to meet Kennedy's expectations because his expectations were unrealistic. The expectations were unrealistic for several reasons. First, the JCS became involved in the planning for the invasion of Cuba only a week before Kennedy's inauguration. Therefore, the JCS understood and met their roles and responsibilities based on their experiences under President Eisenhower. Second, President Kennedy discouraged direct and candid advice from his JCS. Finally, it was unrealistic to expect that the JCS could thoroughly review the Central Intelligence Agency's plans for the Bay of Pigs. Criticizing the JCS provides a simple explanation for the Bay of Pigs failure, but obscures the two principal lessons from the Bay of Pigs. First, the JCS must provide their advice directly and candidly to the President in order to advise him effectively. Second, the JCS must have authority and responsibility for operations with military ramifications, even if they are covert.

Contents

Acronyms	v
Introduction	1
The Context and Chronology of the Bay of Pigs.....	6
Criticism of the JCS after the Bay of Pigs.....	11
The JCS' Understanding of and Actions to Meet Their Responsibilities.....	15
JCS Responsibilities and Role under President Eisenhower.....	16
The JCS Try to Meet Their Responsibilities.....	18
Flaws in JCS Understanding and the Need for a More Prominent Role.....	26
President Kennedy Discourages a More Prominent and Expanded JCS Role	28
President Kennedy Discourages Direct and Candid Communication with the JCS	29
President Kennedy Discourages an Expanded JCS Role in Covert Operations.....	31
Allegations the JCS Lost Access to the President and Were Marginalized	34
The Effect of the JCS' Limited Role	35
Trinidad Plan Reviews	36
The Zapata Plan Reviews.....	38
Conclusion.....	42
Bibliography	46

Acronyms

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NSC	National Security Council

“The first advice I'm going to give my successor is to watch the generals and to avoid feeling that just because they were military men their opinions on military matters were worth a damn.”

—President John F. Kennedy

Introduction

By the end of April 1961, over a thousand men (including five Americans) were dead, wounded, or captured on the beaches of Cuba. The US Ambassador to the United Nations stood embarrassed in front of the General Assembly. The President of the United States contritely admitted to the American people that while victory has a hundred fathers, defeat is an orphan. Ominously, the Soviets began to contemplate deploying nuclear weapons in the Western Hemisphere. Such was the immediate impact of the failed US-sponsored invasion at the Bay of Pigs.¹

In the longer-term, the Bay of Pigs failure worsened civil-military relations in the United States. This was because many in the Kennedy Administration probably agreed with Arthur Schlesinger's description of the Bay of Pigs as “the invasion of Cuba in April 1961, by the so-called Cuban Brigade, a band of twelve hundred anti-Castro exiles, recruited, trained and launched by the [Central Intelligence Agency] on a plan approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.”² This view tended to focus responsibility for the undisputed failure at the Bay of Pigs on the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). It absolved and supported President Kennedy, who despite taking public blame, privately blamed the JCS for providing him with bad advice. It reflected the distrust that formed between Kennedy and his JCS, and explains

¹ Lucien S. Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 39-40; Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 7.

² Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 443.

why the Bay of Pigs still serves as the prologue for describing the poor civil-military relations that plagued both the Cuban Missile Crisis and the subsequent Vietnam War.³

Many historians have examined the involvement of the JCS in President Kennedy's decision to approve the invasion at the Bay of Pigs. This is understandable. By the time the Cuban Brigade (Brigade 2506) landed on the Zapata Peninsula in Cuba, the invasion plan resembled a large-scale military amphibious invasion. Some historians conclude that the JCS met their responsibilities. They criticize President Kennedy and his administration and defend the JCS. They say Kennedy marginalized the JCS and ignored their advice, and ultimately approved a bad plan and made it worse through last minute changes.⁴ However, these historians may absolve the JCS too completely from a decision in which they clearly participated.

The more accepted historical view is that the JCS failed to meet President Kennedy's expectations during the Bay of Pigs because they did not meet their responsibilities. These historians allege the JCS provided bad advice to the President and withheld their reservations, which led him to make a bad decision. Like those that defend the JCS, but for different reasons, the analysis of JCS critics may also be incomplete. First, General Lyman Lemnitzer refused to defend the JCS, and as the Chairman, prevented JCS members from providing their account of the story.⁵ Therefore, President Kennedy's critical views have dominated most Bay of Pigs histories. Second, President Kennedy's close supporters, such as Arthur Schlesinger, Maxwell Taylor and Robert Kennedy explained his critical views of JCS performance, not Kennedy

³ For an example of the Bay of Pigs used as prologue to the Vietnam War, see H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 6-7.

⁴ For a detailed defense of the JCS in the Bay of Pigs, see Jeffrey G. Barlow, "President John F. Kennedy and his Joint Chiefs of Staff" (PhD diss., University of South Carolina, 1981).

⁵ James L. Binder, *Lemnitzer: A Soldier for His Time* (Washington: Brassey's, 1997), 256.

himself.⁶ In claiming to represent Kennedy, his supporters may have intertwined their own expectations of JCS performance with those of Kennedy. They may also have been politically motivated to preserve Kennedy's reputation. Their criticisms may have been manifestations of their biases and historians may have obscured important issues by perpetuating their inaccuracies. For these reasons, the accepted historical view based on these criticisms may be inaccurate. Did the JCS really fail to meet President Kennedy's expectations because they failed to meet their responsibilities?

It is worthwhile to seek a more complete understanding of the JCS involvement in the Bay of Pigs. The Bay of Pigs has rightfully occupied a place in the discussion of civil-military relations along with such notable events as Lincoln's friction with McClellan and Truman's disagreement with MacArthur. If indeed the JCS did not meet their responsibilities to advise President Kennedy, critics would again have precedent to scrutinize the competence of those chosen to serve in that institution, or to question the performance of the institution as a whole. However, if the JCS met their responsibilities, the critics lack a simple explanation for the JCS failure to meet expectations. The explanation may be more complicated, criticism of the JCS may be misplaced, and worse, valuable lessons from the Bay of Pigs may remain obscured.

Any reexamination of the JCS involvement in the invasion of Cuba requires at least a basic understanding of the context and chronology of events leading to President Kennedy's decision. Reviewing the rapid evolution of CIA plans over a three-month period and the abrupt shift in the invasion site provides the context for the Bay of Pigs which is invaluable for understanding the challenges the JCS faced while catching up to CIA planning. The whole US government faced intense pressure to act quickly against Castro before Castro's grip on Cuba

⁶ Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1972), 189. General Maxwell Taylor clearly concludes the JCS disappointed Kennedy.

became unbreakable. In that environment, momentum grew in favor of the CIA's increasingly ambitious scheme.

Next, while some criticism appears baseless, some criticism is quite useful for understanding why JCS critics allege the JCS did not meet their responsibilities. President Kennedy called General Maxwell Taylor out of retirement to lead the Cuba Study Group's investigation into the Bay of Pigs. The public and private conclusions drawn by its members succinctly capture and explain the accusations against the JCS. They conclude that the JCS did not understand their responsibilities before the Bay of Pigs, did not meet their responsibility to advise the President, and did not meet their responsibility to conduct a thorough military review of the invasion plan.

Given the chronology and context of the Bay of Pigs, understanding JCS criticism allows for a logical examination of whether the JCS met their responsibilities. First, did the JCS understand their responsibilities prior to the Bay of Pigs? Congress codifies the JCS statutory responsibilities. The President further prescribes them through formal policies and frequent interaction. Because the JCS became involved with planning for the invasion of Cuba only a week before Kennedy's inauguration, Kennedy did not have an opportunity to establish his expectations until planning was well underway. Because Kennedy had not defined his expectations for JCS advice, it is likely the JCS did not change how they interacted with the President. Therefore, it is necessary to begin the examination of the JCS performance by examining JCS responsibilities under President Eisenhower, and then analyzing JCS actions leading to the Bay of Pigs to determine whether those actions demonstrated a JCS understanding of their responsibilities. This analysis reveals that the JCS understood and behaved in a manner consistent with their responsibilities under the previous administration. However, this analysis also reveals that their understanding of their role in presidential decision-making, gained during the Eisenhower Administration, ill prepared them to serve under President Kennedy. In the

absence of Eisenhower's structured decision-making process, effectively meeting their responsibility to advise Kennedy required a more prominent JCS role. The JCS never appreciated that their recommendations were completely irrelevant if they did not communicate their advice candidly and directly to President Kennedy in person. This provides some insight into why critics allege the JCS did not meet their specific responsibility to advise President Kennedy and leads to a second question.

If meeting their specific responsibility to advise President Kennedy required a more prominent JCS role in decision-making, did Kennedy encourage this? A review of accounts of Kennedy's frequent interactions with the JCS during invasion planning provides evidence that suggests the opposite. Kennedy discouraged them from a more prominent role. Further, Kennedy reinforced the limited JCS role in covert operations under Eisenhower rather than expanding it. A more prominent and expanded role, in which the JCS were encouraged to speak candidly, directly, and authoritatively on the CIA's plan may have enabled the JCS to meet their responsibility to advise President Kennedy more effectively. Even with a more prominent and expanded role, however, the JCS would still have needed to review the Bay of Pigs invasion plan thoroughly in order to provide effective advice to the President.

The third logical question, therefore, is whether the JCS met their responsibility to conduct a thorough military review of the invasion plan. Critics alleged they did not and provided examples of concerns the JCS should have identified during Bay of Pigs planning. Kennedy very clearly expected the JCS to review the CIA's plans for the invasion of Cuba and to provide advice based on their assessment. If they did not conduct a thorough review, they failed to meet the one and only responsibility clearly articulated by President Kennedy. Examining JCS reviews of invasion plans provides evidence the JCS identified many areas of concern, but not all the concerns their critics allege they should have identified. However, a deeper examination of the conduct of the JCS reviews and key decisions leading to the Bay of Pigs provides greater insight

into why the JCS appear to have conducted an incomplete review. The evidence suggests the JCS' limited role in covert operations and Kennedy's decision-making style not only affected the ability of the JCS to advise Kennedy but also the scope of the military review of the Bay of Pigs plan. The JCS could not effectively meet their responsibility to review the final plan for the Bay of Pigs invasion thoroughly because it was impossible for them to do so.

The research into JCS performance during the Bay of Pigs ultimately shows that the JCS met their responsibilities to the best of their ability, and uncovers reasons for any perceived shortcomings far more complex than their competence. The JCS could not meet expectations to advise President Kennedy adequately because their limited role in Kennedy's decision-making process and in covert operations prevented them from doing so. Overlooking these facts leads to wrongly blaming the JCS for the Bay of Pigs failure and obscures two important lessons from the episode. The Bay of Pigs highlights the importance of direct and candid communication between the President and his JCS. It also reaffirms inclusion of the JCS in any undertaking with military ramifications. President Kennedy likely agreed with these lessons. In June 1961, he issued two National Security Action Memoranda that made clear that JCS advice would come to him "direct and unfiltered," and that the Department of Defense would take a leading role in paramilitary operations even if some elements were covert.⁷ These lessons are not new; historians have merely obscured them.

The Context and Chronology of the Bay of Pigs

Evaluating JCS involvement in the Bay of Pigs planning cannot overlook the importance of the political context and the chronology of events. Often overlooked by historians and JCS

⁷ John F. Kennedy, National Security Action Memorandum No. 55, "Relations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the President in Cold War Operations," June 28, 1961, Papers of President Kennedy: National Security Files, accessed October 8, 2014, <http://research.archives.gov/description/193454>.

critics, this context and chronology affected every facet of the Cuban invasion. The invasion at the Bay of Pigs, formally named the Program of Covert Action against the Castro Regime, was the culmination of a CIA led effort to overthrow the communist regime in Cuba. President Eisenhower approved the program on March 17, 1960 and directed it remain a closely held secret in order to preserve US deniability.⁸ Therefore, only a very small interagency group, called the Special Group or 5412 Committee, oversaw the program's covert operations.⁹ However, by November 1960, due to setbacks in the program's covert subversion efforts, the CIA began training a force in Guatemala for a shock invasion of Cuba. That force became the roughly 1200-man volunteer "Brigade 2506." The President did not know about the CIA's change until later that month, and the continued emphasis on secrecy even prevented the 5412 Committee from immediately becoming aware of this change. If any member of the JCS knew about this change before 1961, it was likely only Chairman Lemnitzer.¹⁰ The premium placed on secrecy delayed JCS and interagency involvement with CIA planning until only three months before the invasion. Importantly, it also discouraged the CIA from fully disclosing invasion plans to the JCS.

The Castro issue came to a boiling point in early January 1961. On January 2, Fidel Castro began to expel the US diplomatic staff and on the next day, the United States broke diplomatic relations. Although Guatemalan Press had run articles the previous fall, now the New York Times front-page on January 10 proclaimed, "US Helps Train an Anti-Castro Force at

⁸ Andrew Goodpaster, "Memorandum of a Conference With the President," Document 486 dated March 17, 1960, in *Cuba*, vol. VI, *1958-1960 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1991), Location 19253.

⁹ Steven L. Rearden, *Council of War: A History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1942-1991* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2012), 198. The 5412 Committee was named after the executive order which created it and included the National Security Advisor, Undersecretary of State, Deputy Secretary of Defense, and Director of Central Intelligence.

¹⁰ Vandenbroucke, 15.

Secret Guatemalan Air-Ground Base.”¹¹ Secrecy began evaporating. The exiles training in Guatemala and the Cuban population in Miami grew impatient. Castro’s strength was growing. Coming on the eve of President Kennedy’s inauguration, these events increased the urgency within the US Government to overthrow Castro.

While secrecy initially prevented interagency involvement with CIA anti-Castro efforts, a sense of urgency now hastened it. The CIA finally briefed JCS representatives on their Program of Covert Action on January 11, 1961. The next day, the 5412 Committee approved establishing an interagency planning group. Ten days later, January 22, the new Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, hosted a CIA briefing to key Kennedy Administration officials. Only six days later, on January 28, President Kennedy attended his first meeting on Cuba with the National Security Council (NSC). Although the State and Defense Departments had learned enough to express some general concerns to Kennedy, sixteen days was likely not enough time for other agencies to catch up to CIA planning. When the CIA briefed him on their Trinidad Plan for invading Cuba to incite Castro’s overthrow, it was the only option available. Only eight days after his inauguration, the President authorized the “continuation and accentuation” of the CIA’s current activities, although he did request a formal JCS study of the Trinidad Plan.¹² Despite an initial flurry of interagency activity, the CIA’s Trinidad Plan for invading Cuba became the sole focus of US anti-Castro efforts.

¹¹ US Department of State, Footnote to Document 15, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 1745.

¹² McGeorge Bundy, “Memorandum of Discussion,” Document 30 dated January 28, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 2451.

It is not surprising that the atmosphere of urgency to deal with Cuba continued past Eisenhower's administration into President Kennedy's. In preparation for his January 28 NSC meeting, Kennedy's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, McGeorge Bundy, framed the discussion on Cuba by citing Castro's growing strength and the urgent question of what to do with the volunteers training in Guatemala.¹³ Despite receiving two briefings from CIA Director Allen Dulles in the weeks leading to his 1960 election, presidential candidate John Kennedy had criticized the Eisenhower Administration for its inaction against Castro.¹⁴ Now, Allen Dulles advised Kennedy several times that if he "canceled the project, he would appear less zealous than Eisenhower against communism in the hemisphere."¹⁵ Kennedy was under intense political pressure to act as soon as he assumed the Presidency.

The rapid pace of planning efforts continued for the JCS after the January 28 NSC. The JCS had less than a week to complete their formal study from receiving the details of the CIA's Trinidad Plan on January 31. The JCS provided their formal study to Secretary of Defense McNamara on Friday, February 3. At the next NSC on February 8, Kennedy permitted planning to continue, but also pressed for alternatives to a large invasion.¹⁶ The JCS received a short respite in the rapid pace of planning while waiting for the CIA's next iteration of the Trinidad Plan, and the JCS used this time to dispatch an inspection team to get a first-hand assessment of the exiles training in Guatemala.

¹³ McGeorge Bundy, "Memorandum of Discussion," Document 30.

¹⁴ Vandenbroucke, 16.

¹⁵ Schlesinger, 453.

¹⁶ McGeorge Bundy, "Memorandum of Meeting with President Kennedy," Document 40 dated February 8, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 3025.

On Saturday, March 11, Richard Bissell (the lead CIA architect) presented the updated Trinidad Plan to President Kennedy. Again, while Kennedy supported continued planning, he said he could not support even the revised Trinidad plan. He wanted something less spectacular.¹⁷ Therefore, the CIA quickly developed alternative concepts, including the Zapata Plan, which changed the landing location to the Bay of Pigs. The JCS then provided Secretary McNamara their evaluation of these alternative concepts in time for the Wednesday, March 15 meeting with President Kennedy. The JCS concluded that the Zapata Plan was the best of the alternative concepts, but that none was as feasible and likely to succeed as the Trinidad Plan.¹⁸ This nuance is central to the controversy over whether the JCS ever really endorsed the plan for an invasion at the Bay of Pigs. More importantly, however, historians and critics have failed to acknowledge how this rapid pace of planning affected the time available for JCS reviews. The JCS had reviewed the original Trinidad Plan in less than a week. Now, the JCS had only twenty-four hours to evaluate both the updated Trinidad Plan and the alternative Zapata Plan, because the CIA did not provide the Zapata Plan to the JCS until March 14.¹⁹

In meetings on March 15 and 16, President Kennedy made his decision in favor of the Zapata Plan.²⁰ The context and chronology of events leading to the Bay of Pigs provide facts

¹⁷ US Department of State, "Editorial Note," Document 59, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 4028; Vandenbroucke, 29.

¹⁸ L.L. Lemnitzer, "Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara," Document 62 dated March 15, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 4132.

¹⁹ Cuba Study Group, Memorandum No. 1, "Narrative of the anti-Castro Operation ZAPATA," June 13, 1961, Papers of President Kennedy: National Security Files, accessed September 24, 2014, <http://research.archives.gov/description/193274>.

²⁰ US Department of State, "Editorial Note," Document 66, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 4334.

essential to an evaluation of JCS involvement in the decision. The context includes the secrecy that limited JCS knowledge of CIA plans before Kennedy's inauguration and prevented the JCS from ever learning full details of CIA plans. It includes the sense of urgency to overthrow Castro and the political pressure on Kennedy to act. This drove a rapid pace of planning that likely further challenged the JCS' ability to conduct their reviews. From January through March 1961, the JCS actually had only a maximum of fourteen days to consider detailed invasion plans. Still, the JCS managed to complete and submit several reviews that included their concerns.

Kennedy's approval of the Zapata Plan in March essentially rendered JCS efforts to review the Trinidad Plan moot. Therefore, it is useful to consider JCS involvement in the Bay of Pigs in two phases. The first, January through March, includes detailed JCS reviews of invasion plans to advise President Kennedy on whether to approve the Trinidad Plan. The second actually begins in mid-March with Kennedy's approval of the day-old Zapata Plan and includes JCS actions after Kennedy had already rendered his decision.

Criticism of the JCS after the Bay of Pigs

The Bay of Pigs was a fiasco, and President Kennedy was personally embarrassed. In the aftermath, some criticism was baseless, particularly some criticism leveled against the JCS.²¹ However, President Kennedy created the Cuba Study Group and called General Maxwell Taylor out of retirement to lead the formal investigation of the failure. The Group, which also included Robert Kennedy, Allen Dulles, and Arleigh Burke, interviewed over fifty witnesses over the course of April and May 1961.²² The public and private conclusions of the Study Group's

²¹ Research examined criticism that the JCS only spent twenty minutes studying invasion plans, that JCS desires to overthrow Castro clouded their judgment, and that the JCS expected Kennedy to authorize a last minute intervention by US forces to rescue the invasion if it began to fail. Ultimately, each of these criticisms against the JCS were baseless.

²² Schlesinger, 446.

members provide the primary assessment of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Since these criticisms are the essence of allegations that the JCS did not meet their responsibilities and Kennedy's expectations, understanding their nuance is central to logically reexamining JCS involvement during the Bay of Pigs.

Robert Kennedy criticized the JCS and alleged that the JCS did not understand their responsibilities. He commented that the JCS "realize far better now what their responsibilities and obligations are [as advisors to the President]." He did not feel the JCS understood their obligations prior to the invasion. However, Robert Kennedy discarded the context of the Bay of Pigs, believing for example that JCS excuses based on secrecy were proof of their incompetence.²³ In his criticism, he also appears to conflate the two phases of Bay of Pigs chronology – before and after Kennedy approved Zapata. Robert Kennedy judges JCS understanding only by the failed outcome of the Bay of Pigs. His criticism does not account for how JCS actions during their reviews of the Trinidad Plan demonstrated their understanding of their responsibilities. Further, it does not account for how the JCS' experience with Trinidad Plan reviews and Kennedy's support for the Zapata Plan may have shaped the JCS' understanding of their responsibilities.

Robert Kennedy's personal observations were not included in the final Cuba Study Group report. Perhaps the Study Group omitted his observations in deference to his fellow study group member, Admiral Burke. As the Navy Chief of Naval Operations, Burke was a member of the JCS. Instead, the final report concluded that by acquiescing to the Zapata Plan, the JCS had created the impression they approved it.²⁴ This spawned the second criticism that the JCS did not

²³ Robert Kennedy quoted in Schlesinger, 447.

²⁴ Cuba Study Group, Memorandum No. 3, "Conclusions of the Cuban Study Group," June 13, 1961, Papers of President Kennedy: National Security Files, accessed September 24, 2014, <http://research.archives.gov/description/193276>.

meet their responsibility to advise President Kennedy. However, the report's conclusion has two critical implications on which there has been little historical commentary. First, the report declined comment on JCS performance during the Trinidad Plan reviews, but recognized the JCS had "expressed their preference for Trinidad at the outset." It further recognized the JCS preference "apparently never reached the senior civilian officials."²⁵ Therefore, it appears the Study Group collectively recognized the chronology of the Bay of Pigs and viewed JCS performance in two phases – before and after the President's approval of the Zapata Plan. In this case, "outset" means the beginning of the second phase of Bay of Pigs planning, which began with Kennedy's support for the Zapata Plan.

The other critical implication of the Study Group's conclusion stems from the group's choice of the word "acquiescing" to characterize JCS actions. This is further evidence the group was commenting on actions after Kennedy's decision in favor of the Zapata Plan. Acquiesce means to accept passively. Generally, someone *acquiesces* to a decision already made; whereas he may *approve* or *oppose* a decision still under consideration. Therefore, the Study Group's conclusion suggests the JCS should have opposed the Zapata Plan and tried to change Kennedy's decision. General Taylor's personal comments support this interpretation: "They never expressed their concern to the President in such a way as to lead him to consider seriously a cancellation of the enterprise or the alternative of backing it up with US forces."²⁶ Historians could use Taylor's reflections as an authoritative claim the JCS withheld their reservations or did not meet their responsibility to advise President Kennedy. However, the Study Group's and Taylor's conclusions really suggest a different JCS criticism. The conclusions suggest the JCS should have

²⁵ Cuba Study Group, Memorandum No. 3.

²⁶ Taylor, 188.

fulfilled a more prominent role in Kennedy's decision-making in order to meet their responsibility to advise him effectively.

Robert Kennedy also alleged that the JCS did not meet their responsibility to conduct a thorough military review of the Bay of Pigs invasion plan. "There is considerable evidence that initially at least they did not give the plan adequate study and attention and that at no time did they individually or as a body properly examine all of the military ramifications." Specifically, he thought the JCS should have more closely examined how long the Brigade could hold the beachhead, how the ammunition would get ashore by daybreak, and how the airfield in Cuba would stay viable. They should have examined how to prevent Castro's forces from getting to the beachhead through the swamp, and how, in a contingency, the Brigade could transition to guerilla operations as the CIA had promised.²⁷ Unlike his previous criticism, Robert Kennedy's remarks in this case do reveal the phase of Bay of Pigs planning to which he refers. His use of "initial" cannot refer to early reviews of Trinidad from January through March 1961 because the specifications of his charge refer to factors only relevant to the Zapata Plan. In this case, "initial" can only refer to the twenty-four hours the JCS had to review the nascent Zapata Plan before Kennedy's decision. Unfortunately, Arthur Schlesinger confused this point for future historians when he claimed Robert Kennedy scribbled the above handwritten notes on an "earlier version of the invasion plan."²⁸ This must have actually been an earlier version of the Zapata Plan. In order to correct this and evaluate JCS performance in the Bay of Pigs logically, it is important to apply Robert Kennedy's specific allegations of improper reviews to the JCS' actions for the Zapata Plan only.

²⁷ Robert Kennedy quoted in Schlesinger, 447.

²⁸ Schlesinger, 447.

In summary, a nuanced interpretation of the Cuba Study Group criticisms and those made by Robert Kennedy and Maxwell Taylor provide a useful roadmap for reexamining JCS performance during the Bay of Pigs. This is because historians have repeated these criticisms to explain why the JCS failed to meet their responsibilities and Kennedy's expectations. The criticisms lead to three important questions. Did the JCS understand their responsibilities prior to the Bay of Pigs? It appears they did, but were ill prepared to assume the more prominent role in decision-making that Kennedy needed. If meeting their specific responsibility to advise President Kennedy required a more prominent JCS role in decision-making, did Kennedy encourage this? It actually appears he discouraged a more prominent and expanded JCS role. Finally, did the JCS meet their responsibility to conduct a thorough review of the Bay of Pigs invasion plan? It appears this was impossible without a more prominent and expanded JCS role in decision-making.

The JCS' Understanding of and Actions to Meet Their Responsibilities

Evaluating whether the JCS understood and met their responsibilities to advise the President requires determining what those responsibilities were at the time and analyzing whether JCS actions demonstrated they understood them.²⁹ The National Security Act of 1947 established the JCS and defined its responsibilities. Between 1947 and 1961, Congress amended this Act twice (1949 and 1958) and codified its changes in Title 10, US Code.³⁰ Several of the changes made during the fourteen years prior to the Bay of Pigs invasion affected JCS responsibilities.

²⁹ The two members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1961 who participated most directly in the Bay of Pigs were the Chairman, Lyman L. Lemnitzer, and the Chief of Naval Operations, Arleigh A. Burke. Lemnitzer and Burke both had significant experience in the Eisenhower Administration, serving on the JCS since 1959 (as the Army Chief) and 1955, respectively. Lemnitzer was also a Vice Chief of Staff from 1957 to 1959.

³⁰ President Eisenhower also amended JCS responsibilities through Reorganization Plan No. 6 in 1953. However, his changes to the JCS responsibilities were included in Congress' 1958 amendment to the Act of 1947.

From 1947 to 1958, Congress increasingly removed the JCS from the military chain of command and focused them on strategic direction, planning, requirements, and joint education and policy. Removing them from the chain of command also made clear their collective responsibility as the principal military advisors to the Secretary of Defense, the NSC, and the President. Congress also gradually centralized the Secretary of Defense's control over the Department of Defense, firmly subordinating the JCS and Military Departments under him. These changes defined the JCS' responsibilities as well as their role within the national security apparatus of the United States. Congress also allowed the President to assign the JCS additional responsibilities and gave the President the latitude to prescribe how they participate in presidential decision-making, their role. Therefore, it is useful to review how President Eisenhower modified JCS responsibilities and their role

JCS Responsibilities and Role under President Eisenhower

President Eisenhower introduced several improvements to presidential decision-making, and used regular meetings of the NSC as a central element of national security policy-making.³¹ In March 1953, President Eisenhower formally clarified how the JCS would fulfill their own statutory responsibilities to advise the NSC and the President – their role in decision-making. He replaced President Truman's Senior Staff with a Planning Board of the NSC, advised by a JCS representative, to anticipate and identify security issues, and to formulate and recommend policy options to the NSC Principals. The JCS first submitted their advice to the Planning Board.³² This board met for roughly six hours per week and provided comprehensive interagency recommendations. The Board sent their recommendations along with JCS comments when

³¹ John P. Burke and Fred I. Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989), 13-14.

³² Rearden, 136.

necessary to the small Special Staff.³³ The Special Staff then provided independent analysis and review of Planning Board recommendations before presentation to the NSC Principals and President.³⁴ In short, the JCS accomplished all of their advisory duties under Eisenhower in a single connected process. The JCS met their responsibility to advise the members of the NSC through their integrated work with the NSC Planning Board. Their advice travelled to the President through their advice to the Secretary of Defense because the Secretary of Defense provided that advice directly to the President at NSC meetings.

In “Eisenhower Versus the Generals,” Donald Carter claims that Eisenhower’s procedures subordinated the JCS, particularly the Service Chiefs, and that this may have contributed to the JCS not airing objections to Kennedy during the Bay of Pigs.³⁵ Actually, President Truman began the practice of filtering JCS advice through the NSC. Eisenhower merely formalized it through the Planning Board. Perhaps Eisenhower’s procedures did reduce the direct flow of JCS advice to the President. However, the JCS learned to navigate this system effectively. Although the Chairman was the only formal participant in NSC meetings, the entire JCS often attended NSC meetings and maintained direct access to the President outside the NSC as well.³⁶ Admiral Burke confirmed JCS members frequently participated in NSC meetings under both Eisenhower and Kennedy.³⁷ It is unlikely that JCS subordination under Eisenhower had the affect

³³ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy 1957-1960*, vol. VII, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, by Byron R. Fairchild and Walter S. Poole (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2000), 4-6.

³⁴ Amy B. Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 82.

³⁵ Donald A. Carter, “Eisenhower Versus the Generals,” *The Journal of Military History* 71, no. 4 (October 2007): 1198-9.

³⁶ Rearden, 136-7.

³⁷ Arleigh Burke, interview by Maurice Matloff, November 9, 1983, Oral History Transcripts, Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, accessed October 17, 2014, <http://history.defense.gov/HistoricalSources/OralHistoryTranscripts.aspx>, 58.

Carter claims. Nevertheless, the absence of Eisenhower's formal procedures in the next administration certainly challenged the JCS' ability to meet their advisory responsibilities.

The JCS Try to Meet Their Responsibilities

The JCS understood their responsibilities and role under President Eisenhower, and was accustomed to his formal procedures when they began their involvement with invasion plans for Cuba. After representing the JCS during the January 11 brief on the CIA's Program of Covert Action, Brigadier General David Gray represented the JCS on the Willauer Planning Group. General David Gray was Chief of the J-5's Subsidiary Activities Division. The Willauer Group was the joint State Department, Defense Department, CIA, and JCS planning group quickly formed by the 5412 Committee to review CIA plans for Cuba. Major General Charles Bonesteel (Special Assistant to the Chairman of the JCS) had suggested the interagency Willauer Group after participating with General Gray in the January 11 brief.³⁸ In the Group's first meeting, Ambassador Willauer asked General Gray to prepare a staff study for a meeting on the following Monday, including what military support would be required to support the training for an invasion and the invasion itself.³⁹ On January 16, after General Lemnitzer's had informally approved Gray's assessment, General Gray delivered an "Evaluation of Possible Military Courses of Action in Cuba" to the Willauer Planning Group. The evaluation expressed concern for the potential diplomatic risks of unilateral US military action, and the evaluation concluded that the

³⁸ US Department of State, "Editorial Note," Document 16, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 1750. President Eisenhower had appointed Ambassador Whiting Willauer in November 1960 to oversee interagency anti-Castro planning efforts.

³⁹ US Department of State, "Memorandum of Conversation," Document 18 dated January 13, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 1782.

CIA's volunteer-only course of action at least required US logistical support. General Gray's evaluation also concluded that the CIA's volunteer-only course of action would "not necessarily accomplish the mission of overthrowing Castro."⁴⁰ According to the January 16 minutes of the Willauer Planning Group, the group accepted General Gray's study with only minor clarification.

The Willauer Group's work, including Gray's report, informed new Secretary of State Dean Rusk's Cuba meeting on January 22. This meeting included Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Attorney General Robert Kennedy. In this meeting, Secretary Rusk agreed with General Lemnitzer that an overall interagency plan was required. Secretary Rusk, perhaps informed by Gray's report, also shared concerns over possible repercussions of overt US military action in support of the invasion.⁴¹ Given that General Bonesteel had suggested the creation of the Willauer Planning Group and General Lemnitzer had made a similar recommendation to Secretary Rusk, it is safe to conclude the JCS were at least attempting to obtain greater interagency scrutiny of CIA efforts. Further, in a memorandum to Secretary McNamara on January 27, they proposed an outline for an interagency plan of action. Participants at Secretary Rusk's meeting had informally agreed to the outline, which contained seven options for the President ranging from non-military options to overt US use of force. In their memorandum to McNamara, they also warned that the current CIA plan did not assure Castro's overthrow, and

⁴⁰ David Gray, "Evaluation of Possible Military Courses of Action in Cuba," Document 19 dated January 16, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 1950.

⁴¹ US Department of State, "Memorandum of Conversation," Document 24 dated January 22, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 2147.

that there was not a detailed plan to support the invasion if it proved inadequate or to exploit success. The JCS advice was short lived.⁴²

Despite the JCS advice rendered to two statutory members of the NSC (Rusk and McNamara) and the details of General Gray's report, the January 28 NSC meeting with President Kennedy lacked most of the previously robust interagency discussion and focused exclusively on the CIA's plans to invade Cuba. The Defense Department, presumably Secretary McNamara, provided an estimate that no course of action currently approved by the US Government (i.e. those courses in the CIA's Program of Covert Action) would be sufficient to overthrow Castro. Then the State Department expressed its concern about the political dangers of overt US military action and an invasion's effect on the US relationship with members of the Organization of American States. However, after the CIA optimistically unveiled the Trinidad Plan for the invasion, the President authorized continuation and accentuation of the CIA's current activities. Importantly, Kennedy assigned the JCS a specific responsibility. He directed a formal JCS study and evaluation of the Trinidad Plan, including chances for success.⁴³

Once again, General Gray led the JCS study of the Trinidad Plan. He received an informal briefing from the CIA on January 31. Unlike January 11, this briefing provided details on the Trinidad Plan. General Gray's report on the Trinidad Plan identified many shortcomings. First, the volunteer Brigade 2506 had received no amphibious training, and none was scheduled. The lack of amphibious training and cargo handling training for beach personnel lowered the

⁴² L.L. Lemnitzer, "Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara," Document 28 dated January 27, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 2373.

⁴³ McGeorge Bundy, "Memorandum of Discussion," Document 30 dated January 28, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 2451.

chances of success on the beach in the face of significant resistance to marginal. Second, the invasion force lacked sufficient size to prevent civilians in the area from interfering in operations. Third, there was no sound plan for the roughly 600 guerillas operating in the Escambray Mountains to link up with the invasion force, particularly if significant fighting took place on the beach. Gray recommended sending these guerillas to divert Castro's forces from the beachhead. Finally, Gray identified multiple logistics shortfalls that would quickly become an issue for sustaining the beachhead. Overall, assuming Castro had only a limited ability to form a coordinated counter-attack, Gray estimated the volunteers could hold the beachhead for forty-eight to ninety-six hours, only slightly longer than they actually did in April 1961. The detail in Gray's report demonstrates that the JCS did conduct a reasonably thorough review, at least for the Trinidad Plan.

The Chiefs clearly wrestled with how to present their concerns to policy makers since they were commenting negatively on a CIA plan. Under President Eisenhower, the Planning Board had been the venue for discussing and analyzing interagency recommendations before presentation to the NSC and President. However, the Kennedy Administration began to dismantle the Planning Board process and other NSC Staff functions in January 1961.⁴⁴ In their February 3 memorandum to Secretary McNamara, the JCS settled on modifying Gray's conclusions in three subtle ways. First, their report predicated a favorable assessment of the Trinidad Plan on the CIA correcting the Plan's shortcomings that General Gray had identified. Second, the favorable assessment was for the likelihood of achieving initial military success, not for the likelihood of overthrowing Castro. Finally, they gave the plan a "fair chance of *ultimate* [emphasis added]

⁴⁴ US Department of State, "Draft Paper by the Executive Assistant of the Operations Coordinating Board (Johnson)," Document 6, in *National Security Policy*, vol. VIII, 1961-1963 *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), Location 1262. Although the President formally abolished the Planning Board on February 11 and Operations Coordinating Board on February 18, Kennedy's NSC did not use them and discussions were well underway to abolish them in January.

success.” Ultimate success depended on the invasion inciting popular revolt or substantial follow-on forces [presumably US military forces]. They further concluded that even if the invasion did not succeed immediately, it could still contribute to the overthrow of Castro. This is because in the Trinidad Plan, volunteers would move to the Escambray Mountains if defeated at the beachhead, to continue a guerilla campaign against Castro.⁴⁵ It is fair to say the JCS made a poor choice in choosing cautious criticism. General Lemnitzer justified this by saying, “You couldn't expect [the JCS] to say this plan is no damn good, you ought to call it off; that's not the way you do things in government.”⁴⁶ However, the Kennedy Administration did things differently in government than the Eisenhower Administration. Without a Planning Board and Special Staff, few likely read and discussed the full JCS report. Many likely focused on the perceived bottom-line, a fair chance of success.

Importantly, when the JCS met with Secretary McNamara after the January 28 NSC, neither considered the Trinidad Plan to be a good one. McNamara said the CIA should be told their plan was not good, but it is not clear whom he intended should tell the CIA. It is also unclear whether the JCS expected McNamara to raise this in front of Kennedy at the next NSC.⁴⁷ In fact, McNamara did not raise this at the February 8 NSC, and the JCS report on their Trinidad Plan study seems to be conspicuously absent from the discussion. The only reference to the JCS report was the CIA relaying the JCS bottom line of a fair chance of initial success and attracting popular

⁴⁵ L.L. Lemnitzer, “Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara,” Document 35 dated February 3, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 2564; Wyden, 90.

⁴⁶ Vandenbroucke, 23.

⁴⁷ US Department of State, “Editorial Note,” Document 32, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 2532.

support. Attracting popular support was not part of the JCS' conclusion, but neither Lemnitzer nor McNamara corrected the record. Only Secretary of State Rusk presented a dissenting view to the President. Ironically, Rusk's concern was that the United States would have to be prepared to employ US military forces. This relied on the work of the Willauer Planning Group, informed by General Gray's first military assessment. Perhaps McNamara felt no need to risk telling the CIA their plan was bad in public. Rusk's comments appeared to cause Kennedy to press the CIA for alternatives to a large invasion. General Lemnitzer was silent as well.⁴⁸ Perhaps Lemnitzer, observing his superior's silence, decided against adding his concerns to those of Secretary Rusk. After all, the past fourteen years of congressional amendments had given the Secretary of Defense the sole voice for the Department.

In February 1961, the JCS lacked a formal process by which to submit their advice to the NSC or the President, but they appeared to have at least some success advising Secretary McNamara. Further, each of the two NSC meetings on Cuba had ended with a circumspect Kennedy even though he remained focused on the Trinidad Plan. The JCS' work may have been having some effect from their perspective. They also had to wait for the CIA to adjust the Trinidad Plan based on Kennedy's guidance. This allowed the JCS to focus their attention elsewhere during the month of February.

As part of their report on the Trinidad Plan, the JCS had qualified their conclusions by noting their assessment of the invasion force relied on second- and third-hand reports. Therefore, they sent a small assessment team to Guatemala. The most significant conclusion came from the air assessment conducted by Air Force Lieutenant Colonel B.W. Tarwater. He concluded that the

⁴⁸ McGeorge Bundy, "Memorandum of Meeting with President Kennedy," Document 40 dated February 8, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 3025; Vandenbroucke, 22.

odds were eighty-five percent against achieving surprise over Castro's air forces, and that lacking surprise, surviving Castro forces could sink "all or most of the invasion force."⁴⁹ On March 10, the JCS included these findings in a report to Secretary McNamara. They reiterated their position that the CIA's plan could achieve initial success, but modified a portion of their previous report. Perhaps based on the CIA's mischaracterization of JCS views at the previous NSC, they stated that ultimate success depended on the extent to which the initial assault served as a catalyst for the CIA-assumed popular uprisings throughout Cuba. They also agreed with Colonel Tarwater that if the CIA could not implement additional means for increasing the likelihood of surprise, the chances of success for the Trinidad Plan should be reevaluated. Unfortunately, developments the next day at the White House overshadowed their strongest criticism to date and it is unlikely their report travelled past Secretary McNamara.⁵⁰

On March 11, Richard Bissell updated President Kennedy on the Trinidad Plan. There is no definitive record of the meeting, so it is impossible to know if participants finally addressed any JCS concerns. However, it is possible JCS concerns appeared irrelevant to the participants. While Kennedy supported continued planning, he said he could not support a plan that revealed United States involvement so openly. He wanted something less spectacular, and one that provided for a quiet landing, preferably at night, without having the appearance of a World War

⁴⁹ B.W. Tarwater, "Evaluation of Air Element CIA Task Force," attachment to Document 56 dated March 10, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 3704.

⁵⁰ L.L. Lemnitzer, "Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara," Document 56 dated March 10, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 3586.

II-type amphibious assault.”⁵¹ It may have appeared that the CIA’s invasion plan for Cuba was in jeopardy.

Instead, following the March 11 NSC, the CIA responded to the President’s requirement for a less spectacular landing by providing options that could more plausibly hide United States involvement. On March 14, the CIA provided the JCS with three new options, including the Zapata Plan. The Zapata Plan called for a shift in the landing from the Cuban town of Trinidad to the Bay of Pigs on the Zapata Peninsula. The JCS had twenty-four hours to review the options before the next day’s meeting with President Kennedy. The JCS, in their review of the CIA options for Secretary McNamara, concluded that the day-old Zapata Plan was the best of the alternative concepts, but that none was as feasible and likely to succeed as the Trinidad Plan.⁵² This JCS review appears to have had no effect. It is why the Cuba Study Group concluded the JCS “had expressed their preference for Trinidad at the outset,” but this preference never reached the senior civilian officials.⁵³

In two meetings on March 15 and 16, the Zapata Plan was the only new option discussed. President Kennedy seems only to have focused his questions for the CIA on the breakout from the beachhead and the necessity of landing craft to be clear of the beaches by dawn to preserve deniability. Kennedy approved continued planning and reserved the right to cancel the landing up

⁵¹ US Department of State, “Editorial Note,” Document 59, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 4028; Vandenbroucke, 29.

⁵² L.L. Lemnitzer, “Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara,” Document 62 dated March 15, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 4132.

⁵³ Cuba Study Group, Memorandum No. 3, “Conclusions of the Cuban Study Group,” June 13, 1961, Papers of President Kennedy: National Security Files, accessed September 24, 2014, <http://research.archives.gov/description/193276>.

to twenty-four hours before execution.⁵⁴ Possibly misreading or overruling the JCS preferences, McNamara endorsed the Zapata Plan.⁵⁵ The JCS work leading up to the meeting suggests that the JCS thought the President was still considering options. However, once in the meetings, it appeared to Admiral Burke as though the President had already made up his mind in favor of the new invasion plan for the Bay of Pigs. As Admiral Burke later recalled, “At the end of the meeting, the President would summarize the thing, in the way that President Eisenhower had done. We thought that the President knew what he was doing. We had no idea that he was so uninformed.”⁵⁶

Flaws in JCS Understanding and the Need for a More Prominent Role

Even if the JCS thought the President had already decided on the Zapata Plan, there may be several reasons the JCS did not speak up more forcefully at the mid-March meetings. First, based on the amount of advice that they had provided to NSC members and through Secretary McNamara, the JCS might have assumed that the President was aware of their concerns. If so, this was an error. Many have commented on Kennedy’s structural changes to the NSC and its impacts on policy formation, but that was his prerogative and it cannot excuse the JCS from their responsibility to advise him. The JCS clearly failed to appreciate and account for the impact made to the policy process by the abolishing of Eisenhower’s Planning Board. Second, because the past decade had strengthened the Secretary of Defense’s power to speak for the Department of Defense, it would have been significant for the JCS to disagree openly with Secretary McNamara

⁵⁴ US Department of State, “Editorial Note,” Document 66, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 4334.

⁵⁵ Vandenbroucke, 34.

⁵⁶ Burke, 58.

when he endorsed the Zapata Plan, regardless of the reason. Given the lack of formal processes, Admiral Burke reflected after the Bay of Pigs that people had to “pound on the table to be heard in the Kennedy Administration.”⁵⁷ However, this must have been difficult for the JCS to do when their superior sat at the same table.

Finally, once it appeared Kennedy had decided to support Zapata the JCS perceived there was no place for further advice. During their years with President Eisenhower, the JCS had learned that when the President rendered a decision, all discussion ended.⁵⁸ Opposing President Eisenhower’s decisions had resulted in General Matthew Ridgway’s early retirement, and Lemnitzer and Burke had closely observed that event.⁵⁹ The JCS may not have realized the matter was still open for discussion with President Kennedy. As Admiral Burke said many years later, “We had no idea that when [Kennedy] made a decision, he didn't think that he was making a decision . . . When he made a decision, we shut up.”⁶⁰ What the Cuba Study Group had criticized as acquiescing to the Zapata Plan may simply have been the JCS supporting the President’s decision as they had learned to do under Eisenhower. There were no further JCS assessments of invasion plans after mid-March, because Kennedy had already made his decision and the JCS probably never contemplated trying to change his mind. Instead, JCS documents show their activity focused on providing Defense Department support to the invasion and preparing the Atlantic Command to support contingencies under Operation Bumpy Road.

⁵⁷ Trumbull Higgins, *The Perfect Failure: Kennedy, Eisenhower, and the CIA at the Bay of Pigs* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), 113.

⁵⁸ Arleigh Burke quoted in Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy 1961-1964*, vol. VIII, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, by Walter S. Poole (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2011), 119.

⁵⁹ For a greater discussion of President Eisenhower’s expectations in this regard, see Donald A. Carter, “Eisenhower Versus the Generals,” *The Journal of Military History* 71, no. 4 (October 2007).

⁶⁰ Burke, 58.

Ultimately, the JCS understood their responsibilities and role in presidential decision-making, but the JCS based their understanding on their experiences with President Eisenhower and his NSC structure. They contributed quite a lot in the Trinidad Plan discussions and given limited time, the best they could on the Zapata Plan. However, the JCS never appreciated that their reports and memoranda under Kennedy were an ineffective means of providing advice. They could not rely on their advice filtering through the NSC Staff or through the Secretary of Defense. Under Eisenhower, the JCS' role was to provide advice through the NSC and Secretary of Defense. Under Kennedy, their advice was completely irrelevant if they could not assume a more prominent role in which they communicated their advice candidly and directly to the President.

President Kennedy Discourages a More Prominent and Expanded JCS Role

Although advising President Kennedy required candid and direct JCS advice, President Kennedy discouraged this more prominent role. He also discouraged an expanded role for the JCS in covert operations. Still, President Kennedy's first meeting with the JCS on January 25, 1961 began positively. He expressed an interest in keeping close contact with the JCS and recognized he would frequently see General Lemnitzer at NSC meetings. However, their first meeting soon took a foreboding turn. When Kennedy asked General Lemnitzer what the JCS thought the United States should do about Castro, Lemnitzer's reply was clear. Informed by General Gray's first study for the Willauer Group, he replied that the current clandestine volunteer force was not strong enough. Lemnitzer suggested that CIA plans required an expansion beginning with a government in exile and guerilla operations, after which US military forces could support them.⁶¹ This was the first of several encounters that completely call into

⁶¹ Andrew Goodpaster, "Memorandum of Conference with President Kennedy," Document 26 dated January 25, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 2319.

question the accusation that the JCS withheld their reservations from President Kennedy. It is also the first encounter that calls into question whether President Kennedy appreciated direct and candid advice from his JCS.

President Kennedy Discourages Direct and Candid Communication with the JCS

The President next met with the JCS at the January 28 NSC. Toward the end of the NSC, President Kennedy asked for JCS thoughts on prospects for success. General Lemnitzer provided his opinion that the volunteers had very little chance of success. When Castro responded with the large forces at his disposal, the problem would be who would come to their assistance.⁶² This should not have been news to the President after Lemnitzer's comments to him a few days before. At best, Kennedy requested a formal study and evaluation of the Trinidad Plan in order to understand more details behind the Chairman's skepticism. At worst, the Chairman may have perceived Kennedy's request as a sign of the President's distrust. Perhaps this was the reason for Lemnitzer's apparently inexplicable silence a week later at the February 8 NSC, deferring to Secretary Rusk's dissent and Secretary McNamara's silence. Lemnitzer may have felt his previous two encounters with Kennedy demonstrated that his views did not have much impact. Regardless, the Chairman was clearly having difficulty communicating with Kennedy.

Despite the Chairman's apparent frankness with the President on January 25 and 28, some may argue that the JCS' softened February 3 assessment, a fair chance of success, undermined their credibility with Kennedy. Of course, the JCS and McNamara candidly agreed privately that the Trinidad Plan was not a good plan, but there is still evidence that could point to the JCS misleading Kennedy. When General Gray had provided his review of the Trinidad Plan

⁶² McGeorge Bundy, "Memorandum of Discussion," Document 30 dated January 28, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 2451.

to General Earle Wheeler, Director of the Joint Staff, around February 1, Gray had been reluctant to include the overall chances of success. Wheeler first suggested fair and then pressed Gray for his numerical assessment. Gray concluded the chances were thirty percent in favor of success. In Gray's mind, fair meant not too good. Unfortunately, Wheeler inserted fair as the final language and the JCS agreed with the word's use in their report to Secretary McNamara. Years later, Gray felt the imprecise language and the failure to state the numerical odds created a key misunderstanding about the merits of the plan and the decision to launch the invasion.⁶³

However, as unfortunate as the use of fair is, it is an error to conclude from this evidence alone that the JCS misled President Kennedy. When President Kennedy directly asked the JCS what the chances of success were for the invasion in mid-March, Admiral Burke responded that he thought it was approximately fifty percent. Those odds cannot be easily construed as very good. To say the JCS could have more clearly stated in their written reports their skepticism about the chances for success is reasonable comment. Still, to imply the JCS misled Kennedy into thinking chances of success were anything better than fifty-fifty is inaccurate. Allegations the JCS misled Kennedy must have been particularly confusing for Admiral Burke. At an early meeting with President Kennedy unrelated to the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy had made clear to Admiral Burke that "when you sit there and let it go by without saying anything, I think that you approve it."⁶⁴ However, the JCS had expressed skepticism about the plans for Cuba on February 3, March 10, and March 15 in writing and verbally to Kennedy on January 25, January 28, and March 16.

At the urging of General Maxwell Taylor, and as an outcome of the Cuba Study Group's final report, President Kennedy issued National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) No. 55. In the Memorandum, Kennedy clarified his expectations, "I expect [the JCS] advice to come to

⁶³ Wyden, 88.

⁶⁴ Howard Jones, *The Bay of Pigs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 146.

me direct and unfiltered.”⁶⁵ On the one hand, the remainder of the NSAM was clearly a rebuke and certainly did not represent presidential contrition. On the other hand, Maxwell Taylor recommended the NSAM’s specific language. Because Taylor’s Cuba Study Group recognized JCS preferences never reached senior officials, including Kennedy, the NSAM is strong evidence that Taylor recommended the NSAM’s language as a corrective measure. The NSAM codifies an important lesson from the Bay of Pigs. It emphasizes the importance of direct and candid communication if the President expects effective advice from his JCS.

President Kennedy Discourages an Expanded JCS Role in Covert Operations

The lack of a more prominent JCS role was not the only factor in the JCS’ inability to participate effectively in Kennedy’s Bay of Pigs decision-making. The JCS did not have a significant role in covert operations under President Eisenhower and Kennedy discouraged expanding their role during the Bay of Pigs. President Eisenhower made extensive use of covert operations during the Cold War, including against Egypt’s Nasser and Guatemala’s Guzman. As discussed previously, under President Eisenhower, the Special Group or 5412 Committee oversaw these covert operations.⁶⁶ Although, the JCS were sometimes present and participated in deliberations about using covert operations to advance US interests, they had very limited input into the conduct of these operations. The JCS and the CIA were accustomed to this arrangement.⁶⁷ With respect to the Program of Covert Action against the Castro Regime, President Eisenhower saw no need to include the JCS in Special Group deliberations and

⁶⁵ John F. Kennedy, National Security Action Memorandum No. 55, “Relations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the President in Cold War Operations,” June 28, 1961, Papers of President Kennedy: National Security Files, accessed October 8, 2014, <http://research.archives.gov/description/193454>.

⁶⁶ Vandenbroucke, 11.

⁶⁷ Binder, 273.

purposely excluded them from early planning efforts.⁶⁸ There is no indication that Eisenhower dismissed the value of their opinions or advice; his administration simply held covert operations very closely and to maintain their secrecy as well as deniability they kept covert operations sharply distinct from US military operations.

President Kennedy also excluded the JCS from covert operations. As Admiral Burke recalled, “Over and over again we asked: ‘Can we not put our logistic people on this?’ The [President’s] answer was, ‘No. This is a CIA operation. It is not a military operation. You will not become involved in this.’”⁶⁹ This affected the JCS’ ability to provide specific advice on the Trinidad and Zapata Plans. The JCS perception that they did not share a role related to covert operations likely affected the candor with which the JCS communicated their concerns.

In three specific instances, Kennedy’s actions reinforced the JCS perception that they had a limited role in covert operations. First, as discussed earlier, the JCS believed Kennedy decided in favor of the Zapata Plan without much consultation with them or consideration of their preferences. Second, on April 14, President Kennedy told the CIA’s Richard Bissell that he wanted to “play down the magnitude of the invasion in the public eye and therefore did not want a full-strength [preliminary air] strike but a more limited one.” Bissell obeyed the President and reduced the next day’s B-26 sortie from sixteen aircraft to eight. Neither Kennedy nor Bissell consulted or informed the JCS in this decision.⁷⁰ The April 15 air strikes did not degrade Castro’s air force as planned. They also did not achieve Kennedy’s goal of lessening the magnitude of the invasion in the public eye. Instead, these preliminary air strikes caused an embarrassing situation for the United States at the United Nations. Delegates to the United Nations General Assembly,

⁶⁸ Rearden, 198.

⁶⁹ Vandenbroucke, 23.

⁷⁰ Richard M. Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 183.

including Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, were gathering in New York during the weekend of the preliminary air strikes for a session on Monday, April 17 to hear Cuban complaints of US aggression and intervention. Kennedy cancelled all further planned air strikes until the Brigade was already ashore, had secured an airfield in Cuba, and the aircraft could plausibly be operating from within Cuba.⁷¹ This effectively cancelled all air support for Brigade 2506 and was the third time Kennedy made a decision about the Bay of Pigs with little or no JCS consultation. General Lemnitzer did not find out about the cancelled air strikes until the invasion was already underway.⁷² As discussed earlier, the JCS gave the invasion at best a fifty-fifty chance of success. The JCS based these odds on their understanding of invasion plan, including the invasion's air support plan. The JCS admitted in their congressional testimony after the Bay of Pigs that cancelling the air support would have totally changed their minds about the Bay of Pigs.⁷³

When evaluating JCS performance during the Bay of Pigs, it is important to consider the JCS' limited role in covert operations and the JCS' absence during Kennedy's three key decisions. Kennedy certainly excluded the JCS from his two Bay of Pigs decisions on air support, and the JCS perceived Kennedy excluded them when he chose the Zapata Plan as well. These events suggest the Cuba Study Group's and Maxwell Taylor's criticisms were misplaced. For the JCS to oppose rather acquiesce to Kennedy's decisions or urge cancellation of the Bay of Pigs,

⁷¹ Vandenbroucke, 39-40; Adlai Stevenson, "Telegram[s] From the Mission to the United Nations to the Department of State," Documents 105 and 106 dated April 16, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 5690.

⁷² Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy 1961-1964*, vol. VIII, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, by Walter S. Poole (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2011), 114.

⁷³ US Central Intelligence Agency, *The Taylor Committee Investigation of the Bay of Pigs*, vol. 4, *Official History of the Bay of Pigs Operation*, by Dr. Jack B. Pfeiffer (Washington, DC, 1984), 228.

the JCS would have had to be fully included in covert operations and Kennedy's decisions in the first place.

Allegations the JCS Lost Access to the President and Were Marginalized

In addition to President Eisenhower's formal process for receiving JCS advice, historians generally believe the JCS had greater access to President Eisenhower in private discussions. For example, H.R. McMaster's research indicated that the JCS lost their direct access to the President under Kennedy, and that this contributed to their difficulty providing advice.⁷⁴ McMaster's evidence may be accurate despite General Lemnitzer's recollection that he had no problems with access to Kennedy. Lemnitzer only needed to "express an opinion that [Lemnitzer] wanted to see [him]."⁷⁵ However, having access when the JCS requested it is not the same thing as being present when the President should have had their advice before making a decision. Because the Bay of Pigs was a covert CIA operation, the JCS did not know when Kennedy made key decisions or when their advice was necessary.

Those seeking to defend the JCS have also commented on Kennedy's marginalization of the JCS. However, considering the JCS' role in presidential decision-making and covert operations under Eisenhower, Kennedy did not really diminish the JCS role in the Bay of Pigs. The problem was he did not increase and expand it early enough. The record of Kennedy's frequent interactions with the JCS during the Bay of Pigs suggests Kennedy discouraged direct advice from the JCS and discouraged the JCS from assuming a greater role in covert operations. General Lemnitzer summarized the impression Kennedy left on the JCS in 1976 when he

⁷⁴ McMaster, 5.

⁷⁵ Lyman Lemnitzer, interview by Dr. Maurice Matloff, January 19, 1984, Oral History Transcripts, Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, accessed October 17, 2014, <http://history.defense.gov/HistoricalSources/OralHistoryTranscripts.aspx>, 12.

recalled, “without consulting the JCS, they changed the concept from a covert landing to a conventional amphibious assault [Trinidad], switched the landing site from Trinidad to Zapata, cancelled the D-Day air strike—and then blamed the Chiefs because matters went badly.”⁷⁶

NSAM 55 was not sufficient proof that Kennedy realized his error by June 1961. However, there may be one glimmer of evidence Kennedy appreciated how his actions contributed to JCS performance in the Bay of Pigs. According to his military aide, Major General Chester Clifton:

“[President Kennedy’s] anger against his military advisers cooled after he had time for reflection . . . the President remarked to Clifton that, when the critical meetings occurred, he had not been in office long enough to establish a proper rapport with the JCS. So, he said, the Chiefs were not at fault that much. He had not known enough to ask the right questions, and they had not volunteered opinions as he thought they should have done.”⁷⁷

The Effect of the JCS’ Limited Role

One question remains despite JCS challenges influencing Kennedy’s decision-making and participating in covert operations. Did the JCS at least meet their responsibility to conduct a thorough military review of the invasion plan? This was the only responsibility that President Kennedy specifically gave to the JCS and the final subject of Robert Kennedy’s criticism discussed earlier. In fact, just as their limited roles in covert operations and decision-making prevented the JCS from effectively advising President Kennedy, their limited roles prevented the JCS from effectively conducting a complete military review of the Bay of Pigs. This was true both for their reviews of the Trinidad Plan and for their reviews of the Zapata Plan that Robert Kennedy found so substandard.

⁷⁶ Lyman Lemnitzer quoted in Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy 1961-1964*, vol. VIII, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, by Walter S. Poole (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2011), 119.

⁷⁷ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy 1961-1964*, vol. VIII, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, by Walter S. Poole (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2011), 119-20.

Trinidad Plan Reviews

The secrecy surrounding the Bay of Pigs preparations and the JCS exclusion from covert operations hindered the JCS' ability to meet their responsibilities from the beginning. When President Kennedy asked for a formal JCS study on January 28, the limitations placed on the size of their staff due to secrecy frustrated Admiral Burke. General Gray was allowed only four others for his review of the CIA's plan.⁷⁸ Further, on January 31, General Gray had a difficult time extracting the plan from the CIA. The CIA provided nothing in writing. Gray had to reconstruct the CIA plan using his team's handwritten notes.⁷⁹ This may have been merely a reflection of haphazard planning at the CIA, or it may have been a deliberate attempt to limit JCS influence on CIA plans. An internal CIA document the previous week recommended a JCS review of the Trinidad Plan, but only by one or two senior officers, and only with respect to the military aspects of seizing a beachhead in Cuba.⁸⁰

Recalling President Kennedy's warnings that this was a CIA operation, not a military one, and that the JCS would not become involved, it was likely difficult for the JCS to force their way deeper into planning against the CIA's will. The CIA must have also heard Kennedy's warnings and therefore had no reason for transparency with the JCS. CIA representatives told General Lemnitzer a number of times that the Bay of Pigs was not a JCS operation. General Wheeler noted he had tremendous difficulty getting information out of the CIA.⁸¹ As Admiral Burke concluded, "Saying it is not a military operation did have a very strong effect on the whole

⁷⁸ Higgins, 82.

⁷⁹ Wyden, 88.

⁸⁰ US Central Intelligence Agency, "Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency," Document 27 dated January 26, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 2342.

⁸¹ Vandenbroucke, 23.

damn thing. We did keep our hands off more. You can't be told every time you come into the room, 'All we want is what we are going to ask you. It is not your operation. You are not responsible for it' . . . pretty soon you commence to believe it."⁸²

It is reasonable to conclude that the JCS did not know the full details of the CIA plans and that the JCS was unable to ensure that the CIA addressed JCS concerns sufficiently. Despite these impediments to reviewing CIA plans, the earlier discussion of General Gray's and Colonel Tarwater's reviews demonstrates the JCS still attempted to thoroughly review the invasion plans. On February 3 and March 10, the JCS voiced several concerns with military aspects of the Trinidad Plan. On March 15, the JCS repeated some of these concerns and indicated their preference for the Trinidad Plan over the Zapata Plan. Unfortunately, it is unlikely the JCS concerns arising from their military reviews ever reached President Kennedy.

President Kennedy intended his Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, McGeorge Bundy, to fill the functions of the disbanded Planning Board.⁸³ In Kennedy's preparation for Cuba meetings on February 8 and in mid-March, Bundy addressed none of the JCS' concerns with the Trinidad and Zapata Plans. On the contrary, on February 8, Bundy described the Defense Department's view as "quite enthusiastic about the invasion."⁸⁴ On March 15, Bundy wrote that the CIA had done a remarkable job with the Zapata Plan.⁸⁵ Maxwell Taylor

⁸² Burke, 58.

⁸³ US Department of State, Footnote to "Draft Paper by the Executive Assistant of the Operations Coordinating Board (Johnson)," Document 6, in *National Security Policy*, vol. VIII, 1961-1963 *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), Location 1262.

⁸⁴ McGeorge Bundy, "Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Kennedy," Document 39 dated February 8, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, 1961-1963 *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 3010.

⁸⁵ McGeorge Bundy, "Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Kennedy," Document 64 dated March 15, 1961, in *Cuba*,

reportedly described Kennedy as using the NSC as a registration office for decisions already “made in the comparative privacy of the oval office.”⁸⁶ Whether or not this was accurate, Mr. Bundy prepared President Kennedy poorly and Secretary McNamara remained silent. The absence of debate in Kennedy’s meetings likely gave Taylor and the JCS similar impressions of Kennedy deciding before NSC discussions. Further, as discussed previously, the JCS did not know their concerns had not reached Kennedy, and Kennedy’s demeanor likely dissuaded the JCS from raising their concerns with him directly. McGeorge Bundy once pejoratively described the JCS as displaying the “usual bureaucratic courtesy in not being very severe in judgment on somebody else’s plan.”⁸⁷ Ironically, the informal procedures supporting Kennedy’s decision-making probably prevented any JCS judgments from reaching Kennedy at all.

The Zapata Plan Reviews

When the focus for the invasion shifted to the Zapata Plan in mid-March 1961, the JCS’ exclusion from covert operations and Kennedy’s decisions became disastrous. Their exclusion may even have directly contributed to the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion. First, the JCS had limited knowledge of the CIA’s guerilla plan. If the Brigade could not sustain their foothold on the beach, the CIA told President Kennedy that the Brigade could escape to the Escambray

January 1961 – September 1962, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 4299. Although they did not feel strongly about it, the JCS advised against the preliminary air strikes in order to preserve surprise for the main invasion force. However, the JCS certainly believed in the necessity of destroying Castro’s air force before the landing and included this in their February 3 report to Secretary McNamara.

⁸⁶ Maxwell Taylor quoted in H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 336.

⁸⁷ McGeorge Bundy, interview by Dr. Alfred Goldberg and Dr. Maurice Matloff, April 15, 1991, Oral History Transcripts, Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, accessed October 17, 2014, <http://history.defense.gov/HistoricalSources/OralHistoryTranscripts.aspx>, 21.

Mountains for future guerilla operations. The Cuba Study Group concluded that this CIA assurance greatly influenced the President.⁸⁸ However, the Escambray Mountains lies approximately eighty miles from the Zapata Peninsula beachhead, which is much farther than from the original beachhead near Trinidad. Still, even if the Brigade could make not it to the Escambray, the CIA planned for the Brigade to hide as guerillas in the swamps near the Bay of Pigs.⁸⁹ Robert Kennedy was correct to point out the shortcomings of this plan and that the JCS should have challenged it.⁹⁰ The swamps around the Bay of Pigs were not suitable for guerilla operations. However, despite CIA assurances that they had a plan, the only details of the guerilla plan known to the JCS were from notes taken by General Gray on January 31. Even then, on February 3, General Gray had judged the guerilla plan to be unsound and had recommended improvements. Short of further assurances, the JCS had no way to confirm that the CIA had made adjustments in the Zapata Plan.⁹¹ General Lemnitzer did not find out that the CIA actually had no guerilla plan for the Bay of Pigs until he suggested it was time to implement it on April 19.⁹² In this case, the JCS' ignorance concerning the CIA's plan prevented them from fulfilling their responsibility to review the invasion plans thoroughly.

⁸⁸ Cuba Study Group, Memorandum No. 3, "Conclusions of the Cuban Study Group," June 13, 1961, Papers of President Kennedy: National Security Files, accessed September 24, 2014, <http://research.archives.gov/description/193276>.

⁸⁹ Vandenbroucke, 32.

⁹⁰ Schlesinger, 447.

⁹¹ David Gray, Addendum to "Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara," Document 35 dated February 3, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 2608.

⁹² Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy 1961-1964*, vol. VIII, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, by Walter S. Poole (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2011), 116.

Kennedy's exclusion of the JCS contributed to the Bay of Pigs failure in a second way. According to the Cuba Study Group, the proximate cause of the Bay of Pigs failure was a shortage of ammunition. While perhaps puzzling at first glance, many of the 1200 men of Brigade 2506 surrendered only because they ran out of ammunition. The Brigade ran out of ammunition because Castro's air force sunk the Brigade's entire ammunition supply. Castro's air force was able to do so because President Kennedy reduced and then cancelled the Cuban-exile air strikes supporting the Brigade prior to its landing on the Zapata Peninsula. The Cuba Study Group stopped short of blaming Kennedy personally for his decisions on air strikes. Instead, the Study Group blamed Kennedy's decisions on the failure to explain the air support plan clearly to the President and the failure to explain the probable military consequences of cancelling the strikes.⁹³ The JCS can be faulted for neither. As mentioned earlier, the JCS were not aware of Kennedy's decisions on air support. As further evidence of this, Secretary McNamara and the JCS were actually trying to mitigate shortages of B-26 aircraft as late as April 16, not realizing their efforts were futile because Kennedy had already cancelled the air strikes scheduled for the next day.⁹⁴ Had Kennedy consulted the JCS, they likely could have commented on the probable military consequences of altering the air support plan.

Arthur Schlesinger faulted the criticism of President Kennedy's decision to cancel the air strikes by citing Maxwell Taylor's belief in *Swords and Plowshares* that the cancellation did not materially affect the outcome.⁹⁵ However, that is not all Maxwell Taylor said. Taylor avoided

⁹³ Cuba Study Group, Memorandum No. 2, "Immediate Causes of Failure of the Operation Zapata," June 13, 1961, Papers of President Kennedy: National Security Files, accessed September 24, 2014, <http://research.archives.gov/description/193275>.

⁹⁴ US Central Intelligence Agency, "Memorandum for the Record," Document 107 dated April 16, 1961, in *Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, vol. X, *1961-1963 Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kindle Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), Location 5733.

⁹⁵ Maxwell Taylor quoted in Schlesinger, 448.

counterfactual conclusions about the effectiveness of the air strikes because that was a matter of conjecture. In his opinion, they would not have materially affected the outcome because there were too many other factors that he laid out before the passage cited by Schlesinger. He was comfortable identifying the inadequacy of the air support for the landing as a principal issue. The invasion lacked sufficient numbers of B-26 aircraft and trained pilots. The President did not allow the exile air force to use its full strength against the airfields in the surprise attack on April 15. Finally, the exile air force had nothing capable of dealing with the few Cuban T-33 fighters.⁹⁶

It is not possible to determine how much the cancellation of air support contributed to the Bay of Pigs failure. Still, it is clear that the absence of air support was a significant factor that concerned the Cuba Study Group members, except perhaps Robert Kennedy. Robert Kennedy faulted the JCS reviews for failing to examine the feasibility of holding the beachhead, the ammunition resupply plan, the viability of securing an airfield in Cuba, and the plan to prevent Castro's forces from counterattacking the Brigade.⁹⁷ However, he faulted the JCS without considering how cancellation of the invasion's air support significantly altered implementation of the CIA's invasion plan. The CIA planned B-26 air support to destroy Castro's air force on the ground before the invasion began. Air support also was to protect the Brigade ashore holding the beachhead and the ships on their approach, including the ones with the Brigade's ammunition. Finally, the CIA intended air cover to protect the airfield in Cuba once seized, and strike Castro's forces when they moved toward the beachhead along the three causeways through the swamps. Therefore, Robert Kennedy's criticism of the JCS based on their military review of the final Bay of Pigs invasion plan was misplaced. President Kennedy's decisions to reduce and then cancel Brigade 2506's air support fundamentally changed the final Zapata Plan. The JCS' absence during

⁹⁶ Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, 186.

⁹⁷ Robert Kennedy quoted in Schlesinger, 447.

these decisions meant the JCS were ignorant about the final Zapata Plan's details. If the JCS deserve criticism for their military reviews, Admiral Burke said it best:

“According to what had happened before . . . and in view of the procedures which had been set up, yes, [the JCS] did discharge their responsibility; but morally, they did not . . . I regret personally that I did not insist upon things that I felt uneasy about. I felt uneasy about being briefed instead of having something in writing so that I could wrestle with it.”⁹⁸

It is unfortunate that the JCS did not understand how to operate effectively under President Kennedy and act differently. It is also unfortunate that President Kennedy did not encourage a more effective JCS role earlier. In addition to issuing NSAM No. 55 on June 28, 1961 to clarify his expectations for communication with the JCS, Kennedy issued NSAM No. 56 and NSAM No. 57. These implemented the Cuba Study Group's recommendations to transfer responsibility for paramilitary operations to the Department of Defense, even if they were partially covert.⁹⁹ By doing so, these NSAMs codified another important lesson from the Bay of Pigs. The JCS must be clearly responsible for and participate fully in any operation with military ramifications if the President intends to hold them accountable.

Conclusion

The Bay of Pigs was an important event in Cold War history and in the evolution of civil-military relations in the United States. Unfortunately, most histories of the Bay of Pigs have obscured important facts and issues for many years. First, most histories insufficiently address the misfortune of undertaking this operation so early in Kennedy's presidency. John Kennedy

⁹⁸ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy 1961-1964*, vol. VIII, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, by Walter S. Poole (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2011), 117.

⁹⁹ John F. Kennedy, National Security Action Memorandum No. 57, “Responsibility for Paramilitary Operations,” June 28, 1961, Papers of President Kennedy: National Security Files. June 28, 1961, accessed October 8, 2014, <http://research.archives.gov/description/193456>.

became President on January 20, 1961 and the Bay of Pigs invasion began barely three months later on April 17, 1961. Its timing was probably unavoidable given Castro's growing strength and the political pressure on Kennedy. Robert McNamara had commented that it was important to recognize how much paranoia may have influenced decision-making in the spring of 1961.¹⁰⁰ Urgency, political pressure and paranoia drove action against Castro during the formative months of the Kennedy Administration, and before President Kennedy could clearly establish his expectations for his subordinates, including the JCS.

Additionally, the accepted historical view has tended to place an unfair amount of blame for the Bay of Pigs on the JCS. They were probably far more competent than historians have portrayed them. Criticism began with members of the Cuba Study Group. Of course, the audience for the Group's report was the President that appointed them, and they must have assumed a certain degree of circumspection. The Group's members were far more candid in their private writings and criticisms. Specifically, Robert Kennedy and Maxwell Taylor accuse the JCS of not understanding their responsibilities, not fulfilling their responsibility to advise the President, and not meeting their responsibility to review the invasion plans.

Ultimately, the JCS failed to meet Kennedy's expectations. However, that failure was not because they did not understand or meet their responsibilities. Critics faulted the JCS for not meeting their responsibilities because they judged the JCS by Kennedy's expectations, but his expectations were unrealistic for several reasons. First, the JCS became involved in the planning for the invasion of Cuba only a week before Kennedy's inauguration. Kennedy did not have an opportunity to establish his expectations formally until planning was well underway. Therefore, the JCS understood and met their roles and responsibilities based on their experiences under

¹⁰⁰ Robert S. McNamara, interview by Dr. Alfred Goldberg and Dr. Maurice Matloff, April 3, 1986, Oral History Transcripts, Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, accessed October 17, 2014, <http://history.defense.gov/HistoricalSources/OralHistoryTranscripts.aspx>, 31-32.

President Eisenhower. The JCS' experience under President Eisenhower led the JCS to submit their military advice as they had done in the past. However, absent the formal Eisenhower Administration staffing procedures, JCS advice likely never reached the President and had no effect. The JCS could no longer rely on the Secretary of Defense and the NSC Staff to provide the JCS advice to the President. Still, explaining why the JCS may have misunderstood how to carry out their responsibilities does not absolve the JCS completely for failing to advise President Kennedy effectively in the Bay of Pigs. It is unfortunate that the JCS did not appreciate the situation and act differently. It is also unfortunate that President Kennedy did not encourage direct and candid JCS advice from the beginning.

President Kennedy's expectations were also unrealistic because he discouraged direct and candid advice from his JCS. The JCS told President Kennedy directly and candidly at least three times that the chances for the invasion of Cuba succeeding were not good. Their controversial memoranda are irrelevant. These memoranda appear not to have reached Kennedy any more than JCS concerns did. President Kennedy requested JCS reviews, but then dismissed JCS skepticism and warned the JCS that the Bay of Pigs was not their operation. This clearly sent mixed messages about the JCS' expected role. Kennedy further reinforced JCS perceptions by choosing the Zapata Plan, reducing preliminary airstrikes, and then cancelling Brigade 2506's air support without JCS advice.

Finally, it was unrealistic to expect that the JCS could thoroughly review the CIA's plans for the Bay of Pigs. The JCS' limited role in covert operations and Kennedy's decision-making prevented it. The facts are that they reviewed the plans to the best of their ability given the obstacles placed in their path. Secrecy and Kennedy's exclusion of the JCS from covert operations likely encouraged an unhealthy opacity in the CIA's invasion planning. Still, the JCS managed to submit many detailed concerns that actually manifested themselves in the failed invasion. However, Kennedy probably never saw these details. It is also difficult to hold the JCS

accountable for invasion shortcomings created by decisions from which the President excluded them. Criticizing the JCS provides a simple explanation for the Bay of Pigs failure, but obscures the two principal lessons from the Bay of Pigs. First, the JCS must provide their advice directly and candidly to the President in order to advise him effectively. Second, the JCS must have authority and responsibility for operations with military ramifications, even if they are covert. Even Kennedy must have agreed with these two lessons in June 1961. At the recommendation of the Cuba Study Group, he codified them both in National Security Action Memoranda.

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