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*Perilous Options*

SPECIAL OPERATIONS  
AS AN INSTRUMENT OF  
U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

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*New York Oxford*  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
1993

Moreover, the advocates were not convinced that the limits imposed by the president would necessarily hold. Under Eisenhower, the CIA had been accustomed to a president whose philosophy was “When you commit the flag, you commit it to win.” Once a covert operation began, he could be counted on to authorize what was necessary for success. As Dulles noted, “I have seen a good many operations which started out like the B of P—insistence on complete secrecy, noninvolvement of the U.S.—initial reluctance to authorize supporting actions. This limitation tends to disappear as the needs of the operation become clarified.” The CIA planners seem to have assumed that when the invasion of Cuba began, Kennedy would be no different, and would authorize the participation of U.S. forces in combat if required. Thus they had another reason not to “raise objections” to restrictions they deemed unwise.<sup>59</sup> As Dulles candidly wrote:

[We] did not want to raise these issues—in an academic discussion—which might only harden the decision against the type of actions we required. We felt that when the chips were down—when the crisis arose in reality, any action required for success would be authorized rather than permit the enterprise to fail. . . . We believed that in a time of crisis we would gain what we might lose if we provoked an argument.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, while Kennedy insisted that the operation involve no Americans in a combat role, the CIA quietly assumed that he would eventually commit whatever was needed—including U.S. forces—to win.<sup>61</sup>

The White House formally reviewed the CIA’s three alternatives on March 15. The president and his advisers continued the review the next day. Kennedy was adamant that the operation should involve nothing beyond the capabilities of exiles acting on their own, so as to not betray the U.S. hand. The White House found Zapata the best of the CIA alternatives. Kennedy, however, made changes “to reduce the noise level.” He asked that the invasion fleet clear the area by dawn. On March 16 Kennedy allowed the CIA to proceed on the assumption that he would authorize the Zapata plan, yet reserved the right to cancel the operation up to twenty-four hours prior to landing. The invasion was set for

60. Dulles, handwritten notes, Box 244, x, y, AWDP. Bissell denies that the planners “deliberately allowed Kennedy and his senior political advisers to ignore major weaknesses in the invasion plan.” He acknowledges that they made “inaccurate” assumptions but says these “represented the best honest judgment of those in charge.” Bissell, “Response to . . . Vandenbroucke,” 377–380. Dulles explicitly states, however, that he kept his peace about key weaknesses of the plan. And the accumulation of “oversights”—the failure to note that the Bay of Pigs was not guerrilla terrain, to state that the Brigade was not interested in a guerrilla option, to dwell on morale problems among the trainees, or to point out that part of the Brigade would have next to no training—suggests that the same mechanism that led Dulles to try to silence Lansdale was again at work: the desire to sweep negative information under the rug.