

Richard Bissell, Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 4/25/1967
Administrative Information

Creator: Richard Bissell
Interviewer: Joseph E. O'Connor
Date of Interview: April 25, 1967
Location: East Hartford, C.T.
Length: 31 pages

Biographical Note

Bissell, Deputy Director of Plans for the Central Intelligence Agency from 1959 to 1962, discusses the planning for the Bay of Pigs invasion, including the timing of when John F. Kennedy learned of the plans, the Joint Chiefs of Staffs' involvement in the planning, and the possibility for alternate outcomes, among other issues.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed April 10, 1972, copyright of these materials has passed to the United States Government upon the death of the donor. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Richard Bissell, recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, April 25, 1967, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

General Services Administration
National Archives and Records Service

Revision of the Gift of Personal Statement

of Richard M. Bissell, jr.

to the

John F. Kennedy Library

In accordance with #6 of the statement signed by me on January 19, 1972 and by James B. Rhoads, the Archivist of the United States, on January 26, 1972, the gift of personal statement is hereby revised as follows:

1. The interview is to be closed to general research until my death.

2. During the term of these restrictions researchers may apply to me for written permission for access to the interview, and those receiving my written permission are to be granted access to the interview by the Director of the John F. Kennedy Library.

Richard M. Bissell jr.
Richard M. Bissell, jr.

1 March 1972
Date

James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

APR 10 1972
Date

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By Richard M. Bissell, jr.

to the

John F. Kennedy Library

I, Richard M. Bissell, jr. of East Hartford, Connecticut, do hereby give to the John F. Kennedy Library, for use and administration therein, all my rights, title and interest, except as hereinafter provided, to the tape recording and transcript of the interview conducted at East Hartford, Connecticut on April 25, 1967, for the John F. Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. The transcript will be opened immediately to general research use.

2. Researchers who have access to the transcript may listen to the tape; however, this is to be for background use only, and researchers may not cite, paraphrase or quote therefrom.

3. I retain literary property rights until August 1, 1976, or until my death, whichever is the later, at which time the literary property rights shall be assigned to the United States Government.

4. For so long as I retain literary property rights to the interview, readers may make brief quotations from it without my permission. Extensive quotation may not be made without my express permission.

5. Copies of the interview transcript may be provided upon request to any researcher, and may, upon request, be deposited for use in other institutions.

6. This agreement may be revised or amended by mutual consent of the parties undersigned.

Richard M. Bissell jr.
Richard M. Bissell, jr.

James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

19 January 1972
Date

January 26, 1972
Date

Richard Bissell—JFK #1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Contacts with John F. Kennedy (JFK) during 1960
3, 24	Planning for the Bay of Pigs invasion
10	Role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in planning the Bay of Pigs
20	War in Laos
22	JFK's changes to intelligence communication structures
26	Support for and objections to the Bay of Pigs plan by specific people
28	Possibility of setting up a network of guerillas within Cuba

First of Two Oral History Interviews

with

Richard Bissell

East Hartford, Connecticut

April 25, 1967

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Bissell, I wanted to begin this by asking you if you had any contacts with John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] before he became President.

BISSELL: Yes, I had rather occasional and fleeting comments. I think the first time I actually met him, under circumstances where I sat down and talked to him, was when I went up to see him in his office in the Capitol. This was at a fairly early stage in his campaign, and it was for the purpose of—he invited me to contribute, in writing, any ideas that I might have that could be fed into the campaign that would be valuable to him in the campaign. I was eager to do so, but the press of business kept me fairly busy, and I think as it turned out, I never did make such contributions. I may have seen him once or twice more during the campaign, but really very little until after the election.

O'CONNOR: Did he have any things particularly in mind when he asked you for help?

BISSELL: I had the impression that he didn't have, at that point, anything much in mind having to do with the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], where I was, of course, then working and had been for about six years. I'm inclined to think he was more interested in economic policy, but we didn't really bring it to the point or sharply defining a field. I think there's one more reason that may have influenced him to make the suggestion, which is that I was one individual known to him and known quite well to a number of his close associates as being a Democrat, a professed Democrat, and also being interested in his candidacy. I was one such person who was active in the executive branch of the government and at a fairly senior civil service level. I don't mean for one moment that there was any intimation that he wanted to use me to find out what was going on in the inner councils of the administration; that was not the thrust at all. It is simply that I was an individual who had had, and was still having, current experience inside the executive branch. I think he was well aware that many problems of government inevitably looked differently from inside than from outside, even where that difference doesn't have anything to do with privileged information or classified information.

O'CONNOR: Okay, then I would presume your next contact with him would have come, well, perhaps just during the campaign. Were you involved at all in the briefing that he received?

BISSELL: I really wasn't very much involved in that, and I was a little reticent to be. I don't remember any specific suggestion to that effect being made, but I would have been a bit reticent simply because of my position in the government.

[-2-]

O'CONNOR: But I thought specifically of the briefing that he received regarding—well, various matters, undoubtedly—but regarding the Bay of Pigs. There was, as you're well aware, a controversy over whether or not he had known anything about the invasion, about the plans for infiltration or invasion of Cuba before the election was actually held.

BISSELL: My impression is that he didn't know anything about those plans before the election. The next time that I remember seeing him at any length was an occasion that has been widely reported when Allen Dulles [Allen W. Dulles] and I went down just after Thanksgiving, after the election, and gave him a pretty extensive briefing on the Bay of Pigs and on many other things as well. I think he probably had intelligence briefings during the campaign; that is to say, briefings in which he was appraised of the latest intelligence on the state of the world. But I took no part in those, that wouldn't have been a part of my job in the CIA, anyway, and I would be fairly surprised if those had covered the Bay of Pigs at all.

O'CONNOR: Well, when the briefing with you and Allen Dulles took place at Thanksgiving time, had the decision been made at that time to advance

the Bay of Pigs or the Cuban operation from infiltration, perhaps, to a modified invasion? Had this decision taken place yet?

BISSELL: I would say that the decision had taken place because the plan as we outlined it to him did contemplate some form of landing of a significant force to act as a catalyst in inducing, ultimately, a revolutionary situation in Cuba. It's difficult to answer the question, however, because that decision as to the character of the operation was rather gradually modified during the late autumn, and it's very difficult even for someone who was close to those developments, to put a finger on the exact moment when a clear decision was made or the circumstances or, really, the people who made it. It was a

[-3-]

decision rather forced by circumstances.

O'CONNOR: Well, much has been made of the pressure on the President-elect and President from the fact that a body of men was training for this operation. Was this pressure much, was this pressure very great before the Inauguration? Are you aware of this...

BISSELL: I don't believe it was because I don't think that before the Inauguration he tried to concern himself in any detail with this activity. My impression was that this was a period when his efforts were overwhelmingly directed to the selection and choice of people for various positions and in which he really didn't have very much time to spend on the Bay of Pigs.

O'CONNOR: Well, when does this become a major factor? Or did it ever, the pressure of...

BISSELL: Oh, it did become so. Yes, it did become so later; I think the pressure began to be felt, as such, perhaps as much as a month after the Inauguration. I say that as much time as that elapsed simply because my recollection is that it was possible and logical to allow the preparatory phase to go forward for at least that period of time before the ultimate decisions began to seem imminent and had to be faced very seriously. Of course, the pressure in the first month of a new administration of the decisions that have to be made is so intense—I think in some ways more so than in any subsequent period except the most extreme crises—that anything that doesn't absolutely demand attention is bound to be here pushed off.

[-4-]

O'CONNOR: Much has been made of this pressure, and the defenders of John F. Kennedy have said, in effect, that he was presented almost with a

fait accompli, that it was very, very difficult to reverse this measure once it had begun rolling. Now, do you agree with that or not? How strong do you feel the pressure was, or what chance—what opportunity do you feel the President had to reverse the decision? I know he legally always had the chance up until the move was actually taken.

BISSELL: Yes. Well, I think I would agree that the pressure—which I'll for the moment call the pressure of circumstances, but also a pressure applied through people, including myself—was very strong. By the time this began to be a serious issue requiring major decisions, there was a significant military force; it was in training under circumstances that could not be maintained for very long. There were a variety of circumstances: the impending arrival of the rainy season, the inadequacy of the facilities of the training camp in Guatemala, the increasingly precarious political position of this venture vis-à-vis Ydigoras [Ydigoras Fuentes Miguel], the President of Guatemala, the impossibility of maintaining the Cubans as a force and maintaining their morale and discipline if they weren't committed to action fairly soon.

There were many circumstances, of which I have perhaps enumerated the principal ones, which made some action to change radically the location, status, and role of that military force absolutely essential and urgent. So the alternative was not, as I'm sure has been said many times, that of continuing to train and prepare a military force or else to commit it to action. The alternative to committing it to action would have been to move it back to the U.S. or to break it up and disperse it, or both. This would have been a very difficult and messy operation. It not only would have been difficult and messy at the level of the Cubans themselves and the Cuban force, but as we all know it had domestic political overtones that were pretty serious. Because of what would have had to have been done, the action would have been widely publicized, and there would have been a great many Cubans expressing their

[-5-]

view that here they were ready to recapture their homeland by their own efforts and the U.S. government was actively preventing it.

The President, therefore, within a couple of months of coming into office, would have been open to the accusation that he was dismantling the government's major effort to unseat Castro [Fidel Castro]. Castro was extremely unpopular then. The whole issue of relations with him was much more exacerbated at that point than it is now. I think, therefore, that the pressures—ultimately built up by the circumstances in being, but expressed as potential political pressures and a very real concern about the wisdom of breaking up the only effective anti-Castro force—I think these pressures became very powerful indeed.

O'CONNOR: Because of these pressures, this force of circumstance, to an outsider there seems to be a sort of inevitability about the Bay of Pigs

operation. I don't know whether you'd agree with that or not, but I would like to ask you if or when consideration was given to alternatives. What would be done with the men training if it was decided to call off the operation?

BISSELL: Well, consideration was given to that off and on all through those early months—really, from the beginning in February until the operation was actually mounted—because we had to face this possibility a number of times. The plan, as I remember it, that was ultimately adopted as a fallback plan, was that they would be embarked on the vessels that had been chartered for the invasion, but those vessels would have been taken into convoy by American Naval vessels and brought to a U.S. port or to Guantanamo or to the Marine station on Vieques or some place of this kind. As far as it went, that was feasible. I don't think anyone had tried to think through all the details of then disarming and demobilizing these people and actually returning them to the U.S., although that part would not have been too difficult.

[-6 -]

O'CONNOR: Frankly, I thought that would be the most difficult part. I think that's what everyone was worried about, the problem of disarming the force and returning it to...

BISSELL: What I really mean is that if they'd been under U.S. Naval escort, they would really have had no choice. If they'd been taken first to some port other than in the continental U.S., let us say some military base in the Caribbean, and they had there been disembarked and disarmed, perhaps that's when the political and similar difficulties would have stared, but the military problem, I think, would have been under control by that time.

O'CONNOR: Okay. There is a controversy over what the role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was, or the military in the United States.

BISSELL: Could I go back and add a little to your preceding question because one is bound to speculate about might-have-beens of all kinds. As I look back, I think one of our failures, collectively, in the course of the decision-making process, one of the respects in which that process was, with hindsight, unsatisfactory, is that some other alternatives were not considered, perhaps because some of the basic underlying assumptions of the operation were not brought out and reviewed.

Let me expand on this point and make a little clearer what I'm driving at. A decision that was at no point questioned during the period we're talking about, the early months of the new Administration, was that if this operation were to be carried forward at all, it would be so as, ostensibly, an activity of the Cubans; one which was certain to be suspected of receiving some support from the U.S. government, but nevertheless, basically undertaken and carried forward on Cuban initiative with the possibility of a plausible disclaimer of support by the U.S. government. This was the concept of this as an

operation, and of course this is the reason that the CIA rather than the Pentagon was in charge of it.

[-7-]

I think one simple failure of observation on the part of really all of us who were involved, including the President and Rusk [Dean Rusk] and very definitely all of us in the CIA was that, despite reading the daily papers and listening to the radio, we didn't really grasp the extent to which it was believed by everyone else that whatever operation was in preparation was very much on the initiative of the U.S. government and under the direction of the U.S. government rather than on Cuban initiative and under effective Cuban control. In the public discussion it was more and more taken for granted that this was, in effect, an activity of the U.S. government, which, to be sure, was using Cubans, but really only using them.

Therefore, I believe that, just as a matter of fact, the concept of this as an operation, responsibility for which could be plausibly disclaimed by the U.S. government, had lost its validity many weeks before the invasion itself took place. It was this fact, as I now believe it to have been, that really, it seems to me, was never faced by those of us in the CIA who were advocating the operation and deeply committed to it emotionally, or by someone like Rusk, who was on the whole opposed to it, or by the President or others in the circle of advisors. The one thing that seemed to be taken sort of for granted throughout was that if anything was going to be done, it would be done within this original concept.

My feeling is that if the breakdown of that concept had been faced, some other possible courses of action would have been considered. One was to decide that the Administration would go forward with the operation but would do so in ways that took full advantage of the fact that it was going to be attributed to the U.S. government no matter what denials and what official positions were taken. And there are quite a few things that could have been done to enhance the chances of success of this operation if it was once admitted that U.S. government responsibility was going to be established in the public mind beyond any possibility of doubt. For instance, using U.S. volunteers as pilots would have made a significant difference. If this decision had been made some weeks in advance, the whole scale of the

[-8-]

operation could have been different. Probably more sophisticated weaponry could have been used. Even without committing any U.S. citizens or any but a handful of volunteers to action on the ground, it still would have been possible to make it a more militarily effective operation.

Alternatively, if the complete breakdown of that concept had been faced, I am inclined to think Dean Rusk would have argued even harder than he did, and he might very well have won the day in favor of complete cancellation of the operation. But, as I look back on it, almost everybody continued, really without much debating of this point, to believe that the fig leaf was still in place. And that belief, the deep reluctance of Rusk

to drop the fig leaf if the operation was going to be done at all, the President's own reluctance to drop the fig leaf, these, I think, in the final weeks did contribute to the ultimate failure of the operation.

O'CONNOR: Well, do you think sufficient attention also was paid to the domestic political consequences early enough in the operation, early enough in the planning?

BISSELL: You mean the U.S. domestic political consequences? I think probably not, because certainly the people who were concerned, like myself, with the conduct of the operation simply weren't spending any time on the domestic political complications. We were very concerned with the political platform, as it were, of the Council [Cuban Revolutionary Council], which was the political arm of the invasion. A lot of nonsense has been written about the degree to which this was a conservative group and the degree to which the U.S. government's influence was in the direction of conservative doctrines. This is just plain false; it was quite the other way. But I don't think much attention was paid to the political implications or possible repercussions in the U.S.

[-9-]

O'CONNOR: Okay. I started to ask you a little bit ago about the role that the Joint Chiefs of Staff played in this. There's been much question about this, much has been written about this. Can you tell me at what point the Joint Chiefs of Staff or the Pentagon became involved? In other words, was it ever strictly a CIA operation?

BISSELL: Let me answer in these phases: for the first eight months or so of the whole activity, which took it up almost to the change of administration, the military had been involved as they are or have been in a number of CIA operations. There were military personnel assigned to the CIA to work as part of the CIA staff. This was the source of the men who did most of the military training, of course. The principal military officer in charge of the planning and finally the military conduct of the operation was a very fine Marine colonel, an outstanding officer. Then we had made some use of various military facilities: we got our B-26's, as I remember it, by release from the National Guard; we got some National Guard pilots or air crews to volunteer primarily for training purposes; we used the ex-military base at Miami as a logistics base; we undoubtedly—and I don't know the details of this—used other military installations on occasion for loading ships and doing things of this sort. All of this involvement, however, was at a relatively low level, and it comes under the heading of support by the Department of Defense to CIA activities.

I would say that the most decisive change in the role of the Joint Chiefs came early in the Administration. I can't remember just how soon, but I do know that the very first time this was discussed in a policy meeting in the White House, the President said,

“Have the Joint Chiefs done a careful evaluation of this operation?” The answer was negative. And he said, “I want that done as the very next step.”

[-10-]

One reason that the subject was then fairly quiescent at the policy level in Washington, at least through February, was that the Joint Chiefs formed a committee, a senior officer from each of the three services chaired by an Army brigadier general, to carry out an evaluation. This committee, first of all, came and reviewed the provisional operational plans. They then went down to Central America and elsewhere, wherever we had operational activities, and looked them over. My recollection is they got back to Washington and finished their appraisal in the latter part of February, then made a report in the first instance to the Joint Chiefs. The Joint Chiefs accepted their conclusions. Their report was then, in effect, presented either by General Gray [David W. Gray], who was the chairman of that group, or else by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs to the President in one of those policy meetings.

From that point on, the involvement of the Joint Chiefs was very much more intimate because that review committee remained in existence to review variations in and new versions of the military plan, also to keep an eye on the implementation of these plans. That committee of three military officers worked very very closely with us, and they spent, I think, as much time in the office where this project was quartered in Washington as they did over in the Pentagon. Theoretically, they were a committee to oversee and report to the Joint Chiefs. They had no authority, and in the CIA no one had any authority over them. In practice, however, they worked very closely with the senior military commander, the Marine colonel I spoke of, who was on assignment to the CIA and in the line of command reported to me.

O'CONNOR: Well, when the Joint Chiefs of Staff first became involved, or this committee selected by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was it understood by them that they could reject this operation, or was it simply the feeling that they were to implement...

BISSELL: No, very definitely, in that first month, the question was whether the operation should go forward. What they were invited to do at that point had nothing to do with implementation. They were acting, at that point, very clearly and explicitly in their

[-11-]

role as the President's advisors and not in the role of an implementing or directing body.

O'CONNOR: It seems to me from what little I know about the operation, that the plan tended to have a series of weak points, or at least from an overall military standpoint it was a rather fragile plan. It depended on the perfect execution of various things. Did you ever feel that the Joint Chiefs of Staff or that the committee, the military committee, did not emphasize sufficiently to you or to the President the fragility of the plan?

BISSELL: The answer to that is affirmative. I did have that feeling on several specific occasions. I suppose the reason I felt it, however, was that it affected the President's attitude toward the form and implementation of the plan. I had great confidence in the Marine officer who was directing the military side of this operation. He was trained and experienced in amphibious warfare. From the moment when it began to appear that this would involve the landing of a significant body of troops—now we were first talking of four or five hundred as against three times that number that eventually went in—he emphasized that if the group were large enough so they couldn't make what would amount to a completely clandestine entry into Cuba, then air cover of the operation was absolutely essential, and if the air cover was not fully effective, the operation wouldn't succeed. He said flatly, “This is accepted doctrine. And every military officer who knows anything about amphibious operations knows that unless you can count on solid air cover, the chances of success are small.”

O'CONNOR: This he was saying to you.

[-12-]

BISSELL: To me and to Allen Dulles, and to Cabell [Charles Pearre Cabell], Allen's deputy, my boss. And we, all of us, accepted this position. The feeling I had then, and I have never changed this in any degree, is that as a piece of military doctrine it was surprising and later horrifying to me that the Joint Chiefs did not emphasize this point nearly as strongly as the colonel who was in charge of the operation himself did.

There was one interesting and alarming occasion at one of the sequence of policy meetings in the White House. Before the meeting started, those of us who were to participate in it were talking outside the Cabinet Room, which was still occupied by a preceding meeting. I was told, I think it was by General Gray (the chairman of this Joint Chiefs review committee), who shared, I may say, our view on the essentiality of air cover, something of a discussion that had taken place the preceding day in the meeting of the Joint Chiefs. In that discussion, two of the three Chiefs present had said that they weren't at all sure the operation really had to have air cover, that it had a good chance of success without air cover.

I relayed this view to the military director of the operation, who was also there in the group; he had heard something of the same thing and was, again, absolutely horrified. He said that if the Commandant of the Marine Corps had been at that particular meeting of the Joint Chiefs, he felt sure there would have been a rather different tone taken.

Let me make clear, in none of those meetings did Lemnitzer [Lyman L. Lemnitzer] or Arleigh Burke [Arleigh Albert Burke], who was acting Chief whenever Lemnitzer was away, nor did the chairman of the JCS review group, General Gray, say to the President, “We don't believe that air cover is absolutely vital for this operation.” As to General Gray, I don't think he believed any such thing, and of course the Joint Chiefs, I'm sure, would all have agreed that effective air cover enhanced the chances of success. Nevertheless, I don't

exclude the possibility that the President became aware, one way or another, that the Chiefs placed less emphasis on pre-invasion air strikes to knock out the Castro air force than did those in charge of planning the operation. And I may

[-13-]

say that as a civilian with no military experience, I was put in a very odd position to know that at the level of the Chiefs themselves there was real question about the doctrine that the colonel reporting to me regarded as so essential.

I think it has to be said that if there's anything hindsight tends to prove, it is that the colonel was right. With hindsight, I think one is not justified in saying that given adequate air cover the operation would surely have been a success. I've never thought that one could be at all certain of that. I do think you could pretty well say, however, that without air cover it didn't have a chance.

O'CONNOR: This apparently wasn't brought out very strongly in the meetings with the President in discussion.

BISSELL: No. Particularly, the representatives of the Chiefs there didn't take this position strongly. You see, a great many of the policy questions that kept arising in those planning meetings with the President had to do with whether "you really have to have these air strikes?" I'm sure that in advance of the event both he and Secretary Rusk were more worried about the effect on world opinion of the air operations than they were about the landing itself. They were eager to see the landing done as unobtrusively as possible—indeed, we all were—and hence their desire, which was, of course, what was done, to trim back the preparatory air operations.

[-14-]

O'CONNOR: Well, the thing that Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] brought out in his book was that the military men who were involved in this, the Joint Chiefs' committee or the Joint Chiefs themselves, never really had an opportunity—now this is what he says, I believe—never really had an opportunity to make their views known effectively because there was no agenda to meetings, things kept changing, and by the time they realized the change had taken place, the planning was already past that. Do you agree or disagree with that?

BISSELL: By and large, I disagree with that, although I think you can shade this one way or the other. It is perfectly true that there were no agendas for the policy meetings with the President. It is not true that as the military plan changed in certain respects, major respects, the Chiefs did not have an opportunity themselves to consider and then to make known their views on such a revision of the plan as, for instance, the much discussed shift from a plan for a landing at Trinidad to a landing at the Bay of Pigs.

The Chiefs always knew in what respects the plan was being revised or reconsidered because their review committee under General Gray, as I have said, was in daily intimate touch with the planners and, in a sense, were helping with the planning of the operation. Furthermore, the chairman of that committee reported to the Chiefs, I believe at every meeting of the Joint Chiefs during all of this period. So the Joint Chiefs were up to date on what was happening in the planning.

[-15-]

Now in the case of that major change of locale from Trinidad to the Bay of Pigs, the Chiefs—as again I'm sure has been said in the books—not only knew of it, but they had a chance to consider it, and they did have a written comment on that. In the last rather hectic days, that was not true. After all, the famous decision to cancel an air strike scheduled for Monday morning wasn't made until six o'clock Sunday evening. It was made, to the best of my knowledge and belief, without consultation with the Chiefs. The Chiefs were not consulted on a decision that the air strike that was made on the Saturday morning would be cut to about half strength or less. And indeed, the way that decision was made was rather odd because I was simply instructed by the President to reduce the scale of the strike and make it “minimal.” No figure was set; and that was a decision that I made myself. The Chiefs weren't consulted on that. So there is some truth in Arthur's contention in these cases, but I rather doubt if this is what he had mainly in mind.

In any case, without trying to guess what he did have in mind, I would say this: that although the Chiefs did receive orderly reports from their Joint Staff committee, although they did discuss the operation—and by the way, with nobody from CIA or from the project office present—and although they did express views, only on two occasions that I'm aware of were these views reduced to writing. Moreover, so far as I'm aware, it was not the practice, either in the meetings which I attended or in other private meetings, for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to give the President an orderly account of the Joint Chiefs' most recent deliberations on this matter. If the Joint Chiefs met on a Tuesday and spent half an hour on this and then passed on to other business, I very much doubt whether anyone that afternoon or the next day saw the President and said this was discussed in the Joint Chiefs. There was no action item before the Joint Chiefs. So I think I would agree with Arthur that the way the system worked, the President was not exposed to a kind of orderly reporting of the Joint Chiefs' deliberations.

[-16-]

O'CONNOR: Well, I have the impression that you, as a civilian, and the President were dependent on the Joint Chiefs of Staff to point out deficiencies in the planning and operation.

BISSELL: Yes, that's true.

O'CONNOR: Military deficiencies.

BISSELL: Right. I think that's correct. But also very heavily dependent on the two senior military officers who worked for me. One is the Marine colonel I talked of, another was an Air Force colonel, also on assignment to CIA, who had not been brought into it for that purpose, but really had been in charge of the U-2 operation and of the Agency's air operations generally.

O'CONNOR: Well, did they ever specifically object to a portion of the plan, or were any objections ever effectively presented by the Joint Chiefs of Staff or by the military?

BISSELL: My recollection is that in their original review, when their review committee of the Joint Staff visited the installations, I think they did point to some fairly minor specific deficiencies, but I think they were satisfied that action was taken on those deficiencies in due time. There's no doubt that, well.... I do not recollect any points on which the Chiefs expressed definite dissatisfaction, although they made it clear that they thought the Trinidad plan would have had a better chance of success than the Bay of Pigs plan.

[-17-]

O'CONNOR: In hindsight we can see many aspects of the plan, I think, that could very well have been strengthened by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and I wondered if there were any specific instances that you could recall that...

BISSELL: Remember that the curtailment of strategic air strikes, pre-invasion air strikes designed to knock out the Castro air force, were something that they really didn't ever have much opportunity to express an opinion on. I am confident that they would have opposed that, but I'm not at all sure they would have opposed it in terribly strong terms to the President for the reason that I've indicated to you. As to other deficiencies, well, I think with hindsight there are some that the Chiefs and indeed the military officers who were working for me, should have foreseen and exposed. As a matter of fact, I came to feel immediately after the event that in straight military terms, aside from curtailing the air strikes, the worst mistake by all odds was that the air force we'd assembled wasn't big enough to begin with. I feel very guilty on this point because I think I could have foreseen the deficiency, but I think that our military people had, if I may say so, a greater responsibility for this. We had something like seventeen aircraft and aircrews. A single sortie required about ten hours in the air for about an hour and a half to two hours over Cuba.

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

BISSELL: If you'll just do the arithmetic on the back of an envelope, it's clear that you can't turn one aircraft around more than twice a day, and you

probably can't turn an aircrew around more than one and a half times a day. That means that the most you can get is three hours a day over the target area per aircraft and maybe two hours a day per aircrew. Well, this means that if you did all your scheduling perfectly and if you had no attrition, you could have about one and a half aircraft over the target area all the time.

[-18-]

Now this, as I feel with hindsight, was very definitely insufficient. We were counting on our aircraft not only for the strategic role before the invasion to knock out Castro's aircraft on the ground, but we were also counting on it very heavily as, in effect, the artillery of the ground forces. No one ever thought that the Brigade [Cuban Brigade] could hold Castro's armies off unless you had favorable terrain, which we did, and unless you could call in very strong air support. It's been clear to me ever since that this was a serious miscalculation. And I think that I should have foreseen this, and I think others should have foreseen it. It is for this reason, among others, that I have always been unwilling to say that if the President hadn't called off that air strike, the operation would surely have been a success. I'm about 90 percent certain that the Joint Chiefs never commented on this inadequacy. Indeed, I don't remember the Joint Chiefs ever making this simple analysis.

O'CONNOR: Okay. I had come in here, frankly, with the impression that there must have been—from earlier conversations I got this impression—that there must have been perhaps an institutional lack of communications between the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the CIA. I don't get that impression now from talking with you.

BISSELL: No, I think that is incorrect. I think the communication in the last two months before the operation and during it was excellent, was very good. I think the Chiefs had the mechanism as a result of Kennedy's action, I may say. This had not been the case previously. But with that review committee under General Gray, they had the means of keeping themselves continuously informed, and yet, just as a comment on government procedures, they were able to do so without any improper interference, with the activity of the people who had the line responsibility. I also feel that they had every opportunity to state specific objections because they could either make any objections or comments directly to us through General Clay [Lucius Dubignon Clay, Sr.] or, if they'd wished to do so, face to face, or the chairman could have made any objections that he thought it important to make directly to the President and the whole circle of the President's advisors.

[-19-]

O'CONNOR: One of the reasons I had this impression was because President Kennedy has been criticized for disrupting older channels of

communication and, during the first six months, not instituting new channels to replace them. And again, because of the appointing of Chester Cooper as a sort of liaison man between McGeorge Bundy's group in the White House and intelligence groups in various other places, I thought—well, evidently there was a lack of communication during the time of the Bay of Pigs. But apparently, this lack, if it did exist, wasn't relevant to the Bay of Pigs operation.

BISSELL: I don't believe it was relevant to the Bay of Pigs, no, because that received so much attention that the communications were really very good on that. I would like to make a comment on the general point though. I think one thing that happened during these first few months of the President's term, as others have remarked, is that he largely lost confidence in his senior professional military advisors. That was certainly due in part to the Bay of Pigs, and I've always assumed, rather than actually learned from the President himself, that he felt the Joint Chiefs, in their capacity as his advisors, should have been more vigilant in pointing out shortcomings or causing shortcomings to be corrected, one of the two.

However, I think it's a mistake to assign the major role to the Cuban experience in explaining his at least temporarily reduced confidence in the Joint Chiefs because I also saw very intimately during these months what was going on in Laos and the decisions that were being made there. One reason that the Bay of Pigs operation didn't have much attention for the first few weeks after the Inauguration was that the Laotian war was in a state of acute crisis as he assumed office. The first meeting I attended with members of the new Administration—Paul Nitze [[Paul Henry Nitze] for one, McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] for part of the time, Dean Rusk for part of the time—was one of a series of meetings in the State Department on Laos. I was present at most of these informal policy meetings that were the successor to the formal NSC [National Security Council] that dealt with Laos. Now there was a case where I think the communication certainly didn't work, although it wasn't, I think, because of institutional changes that he made or procedural changes.

[-20-]

What would happen at successive meetings was that the President would be briefed either by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs personally or, as is more apt to be the habit, a more junior officer would actually do the briefing of the whole group in the presence of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and with the Chairman's comments from time to time. I still remember very clearly the occasion when the long planned major offensive by the Royal Laotian Army against the Nationalists under Kong Le and communists in the Plaine des Jarres was outlined.

Well, it was a nice piece of planning to have been carried out in a military college as an exercise in how you would dispose troops, given the terrain and the dispositions of the enemy. It predicted that the Plaine des Jarres would be seized on the tenth day of the operation, or something of this kind by parachute troops. All of this, you understand, was to be done by the Royal Laotian forces. I left this briefing with a sense of complete unreality. I had been close for a year and a half, I guess, to the goings on in Laos, and it just

never occurred to me that the Royal Laotian could, or would, carry out any such elegant military operation of this sort, and of course they didn't.

It really didn't occur to me until after that whole event that the President had taken this plan seriously. And why shouldn't he? He assumed, correctly, I believe, that when he was given a briefing by the Joint Chiefs on the plans of the Laotian Army, plans formulated with U.S. military advisors at every level, that the Joint Chiefs endorsed the plan and thought it would work. I'm sure that if he'd asked the Chairman, the Chairman would have said, "Yes, we think there's a pretty good chance this will work."

[-21-]

On that occasion there were a lot of others of us civilians in the room who would have expressed extreme surprise at the notion that this was going to work out the way it was planned because a number of us had had much more intimate experience than the members of the Joint Chiefs, individually, of observing the imperfections of military execution in a tiny, backward, backwoods Asian country. It is no particular criticism of the Joint Chiefs, perhaps, that they had no feel for that, but it is a grave criticism of the way the system worked. Either because the Joint Chiefs were permitted to be quite unrealistic about what the Laotians could accomplish or because they assumed the President would do his own discounting, he was given, I believe, a completely false picture about what was going to happen in that little war. And I think this was disillusioning to him.

Well, then that was followed by the Bay of Pigs, and I'm sure he felt that here again the Chiefs had given a kind of formal comment on a plan, a superficial comment that did not reflect the results of probing deeply, and that this was another example of the same thing. Nevertheless, I am suggesting that in the Cuban case they certainly were better informed, or at least as well informed, and they certainly had every opportunity to probe deeply and had certainly made an effort through a Joint Staff group to do so.

O'CONNOR: Well, we're getting a little bit away from the Bay of Pigs, but I'd like to get just a little bit farther away before we get back to it at all. As I mentioned, before I came in here I was under the impression that Chester Cooper's appointment as a sort of liaison man—and I assume I'm correct in thinking he was—was a result of the Bay of Pigs, or at least partially the result of the Bay of Pigs. I now see that that is probably not so. Was it the result at all of the difficulties encountered in the Laotian situation, or would you express an opinion or explain what precipitated this?

[-22-]

BISSELL: I don't really know what precipitated it. I will only say that at the time it never particularly occurred to me that it was a result of the Bay of Pigs. I can only surmise that after the President had been in office two or three months, and McGeorge Bundy had been there and functioning, they came to feel that the flow of intelligence had to be systematized and rendered more orderly without,

however, in any sense being straitjacketed or impeded or sifted. I strongly suspect the feeling was that we have to be sure that any new intelligence that is urgent can get to the President's attention promptly; we must be sure that all of the intelligence that is important gets to him systematically with at least some indication of which items he simply must be aware of and which ones are of lesser importance. And I suspect the feeling was that you couldn't accomplish this result simply by the format of a written report with its underlinings, asterisks, omissions, and compressions; that it was very important to put an effective intelligence analyst in a position where he could reach at least McGeorge Bundy and through McGeorge Bundy, the President, any time he deemed this essential, and could say, "These are some things the President really ought to know. And here are some other things in the daily bulletin, and they're not as important."

O'CONNOR: You mentioned that the Marine Corps colonel who served as an advisor, in effect, and a trainer of men had had experience in amphibious operations, and I know for a fact that he did have experience in Iwo Jima.

BISSELL: Yes.

[-23-]

O'CONNOR: But I've at the same time, heard the criticism made of the operation that not enough people with experience in amphibious operations were involved, and that particularly within the CIA organization itself, among civilians in the CIA, there were men—and I'm thinking offhand of Robert Amory [Robert Amory, Jr.]—who had had experience in amphibious operations whose experience was not drawn upon.

BISSELL: Well, there's no doubt that the last is true. There were civilians whose experience wasn't drawn upon, and this is because of their place in the Agency. Perhaps, with hindsight, that was a mistake. I don't feel this in itself was a serious source of inadequacy in the plan or in its execution. The marine colonel had also, as you probably know, been a year and half behind the lines in the Philippines, so he'd had extensive guerrilla experience as well as amphibious. I think some of the usual mistakes that seem to be made in any amphibious landing were made in this case, but not really by want of foresight. I'm thinking of the fact that we did find a reef where we didn't expect one. And this is despite the fact that we had really looked very hard for that with reconnaissance photography.

O'CONNOR: That's something I never did understand. I couldn't understand how...

BISSELL: And I, frankly, never understood that to this day. But again, no amount of added experience in CIA headquarters or at the project office would have made any difference in that because the need for accurate knowledge of the landing area was very clearly recognized. I think an argument could be

made that there hadn't ever been an opportunity to train the senior Cuban officers in the brigade in amphibious warfare. After all, their total training was fairly brief; most of it, I think, was in straight infantry tactics. It would have been very desirable to have been able to take a group of them and perhaps send them down to the jungle warfare training center and get a little amphibious training. There were a lot of reasons, however, why it was quite unfeasible to take the responsible officers away from the unit. It was hard enough to keep the Brigade together, anyway, in terms of discipline

[-24-]

and morale. Also, it was really quite out of the question to proceed so openly about the training of Cubans as that would have implied. There was a grave political objection by the State Department to doing any of the training or any significant amount of it on U.S. territory. Again, the insistence on a plausible disclaimer limited what could be done. So it just wasn't feasible to do that. My own hunch is that if more experience in amphibious warfare would have helped, it would have helped really in the officers of the brigade itself rather than in headquarters' planning.

O'CONNOR: Okay. There is also an important question about the plan or the possibility that these invaders or infiltrators might be able to escape into the Escambray Mountains and become guerrillas. Was Kennedy actually told this very, very strongly? Was this very definitely a part of the final plan?

BISSELL: No. I think it is certainly true that it was in the minds of everyone concerned with the final plan that, given the Bay of Pigs location, there was little likelihood they could make an escape to the Escambray. We did feel there was some chance that guerrilla activity could be continued in the marshes around and especially to the north and west of the Bay of Pigs. Classically and historically that's been an area that's supported guerrilla operations. I do feel the impression we attempted to give the President was just that—that the chances of a retreat to the Escambray from the Bay of Pigs, by contrast with a landing around Trinidad which is right next to the Escambray, those chances were very poor, but that there would be some chance of organizing effective guerrilla activities right around the Bay of Pigs. I feel myself that this is a respect in which all of us were derelict. The President was given, or was allowed to form, a much too optimistic impression of this as a possibility, as a fallback in the Bay of Pigs case.

[-25-]

O'CONNOR: Well, there is, in connection with this same problem, a conflict over whether or not the Cubans themselves understood that this was a possible fallback. The Cubans have testified that they were not told, and yet other people have maintained that they were told, or that this was, at least, a part of the plan.

BISSELL: I can't throw very much light on that. My own belief is that in the last month or so of their training the emphasis was so heavily on more or less conventional infantry tactics and fire power that I doubt if their trainers, let alone the Cubans themselves, faced at all clearly this contingency that they might have to break up and as many of them as possible function as guerrillas. I also don't think that they were well equipped; I don't think we had researched water sources and that kind of thing well enough.

O'CONNOR: There was a very famous April 4 meeting, among many meetings, in which it is said the President asked various people to stand up and give their opinions. Apparently he never got around to the whole group, but at least he did ask various members. And at this meeting, it is said or has been said, that Senator Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] voiced objection to the plan. And yet I've heard from other people that he did not. Now, what was your recollection of that? Do you recall Senator Fulbright's opinions outstanding at all?

BISSELL: Yes, my impression is that he did voice some objection.

O'CONNOR: Well, we're dealing with impressions here all around because...

[-26-]

BISSELL: Yes. That is my impression. By the way, the President did get around to almost everybody in that meeting.

O'CONNOR: I wasn't aware of that. I was under the impression that...

BISSELL: If that's the meeting I have in mind. There was one where he went around, and he asked everyone for their votes. One reason I remember this quite clearly, he came to Adolf Berle [Aolf A. Berle, Jr.]. Adolf gave a rather long reply, which was, well, the alternatives aren't very good, and it has dangers, but if it succeeded, it would be effective, and so on. Finally, when he was through, the President said, "Well, Adolf, you haven't voted." And Berle said, "I'd say, let her rip."

O'CONNOR: I've heard that "Let her rip" a number of times, but I didn't know who it came from, actually. That was one of the things he...

BISSELL: That's it. Several of the people gave, ultimately, inconclusive comments, sort of no objection comments. I remember particularly, that pro votes were given specifically by Nitze, however, who was there, McNamara, Berle in the terms I've spoken of, Tom Mann [Thomas Clifton Mann], I think, when finally pinned down in somewhat the same way. Well, these are the people whom I remember, and I don't know who was there for the Joint Chiefs. I don't know whether it was Lemnitzer or Burke, but I suspect that whoever it was gave an affirmative

reaction. And I know that also the Marine colonel was there in that room. No, I guess he wasn't in that room because he was at that point down at the embarkation. He had been at an earlier session. He may have been there, I'm not sure of that. I think General Gray was there for the Joint Chiefs committee and so on. But it was a pretty complete canvass.

[-27-]

O'CONNOR: Another controversy involves what was expected of the dissident elements in Cuba. Would you comment on that? What exactly did you expect from the dissident elements, and when?

BISSELL: I thought we'd get nothing. Oh, possibly a few sporadic incidents, but nothing of significance until a beachhead was consolidated and had been held for three or four days. By that time, if we had had aircraft operating out of the beachhead and had, in effect, demonstrated that the Castro forces could not successfully attack and destroy the beachhead, if we'd had aircraft able to attack communications and the railroad and targets of this kind, then I thought there was a very real possibility that you'd begin to get significant action.

O'CONNOR: One of the criticisms that is made in connection with the dissident elements is that, number one, they were not told satisfactorily or in time that their cooperation was to be expected eventually, and that this led to their being defenseless when Castro moved effectively against them.

BISSELL: Yes, right.

O'CONNOR: How did that come about? Can you explain that at all?

BISSELL: Yes. I think that the second half of that criticism especially has some validity. It came about as the final climax of one of the developments in the whole course of the operation that had a lot to do with its ultimate failure. This was the complete failure of the effort to organize a disciplined underground in Cuba. As you remember, of course, when the operation was started a year before the Bay of Pigs, it was intended in the first instance as an operation involving the training of guerrilla leaders and organizers, radio operators, and a few technicians, the infiltration of these men and their subsequent resupply by air. It wasn't until months after the operation had been initiated that the concept was evolved of a small landing force to detonate, as it were, an internal revolt

[-28-]

that would have been already organized. It wasn't until the latter part of the preceding autumn with the complete failure of the effort to organize a disciplined underground that the whole emphasis shifted to the landing force, to the invasion.

These facts, I think, are pretty well known, but they need a little more explanation. The key to what I mean by a disciplined underground is perhaps not quite accurately described by this term because its essential feature is a secure command and control and communications net. What I mean by a command and control and communications net is not a large body of men. Perhaps in the whole of a country the size of Cuba it could be one or two hundred people, but people who were highly disciplined, would obey orders, who were compartmented so they knew one another, for instance, only by code name and pseudonyms, who had means of communicating with one another in such a fashion that if one man was apprehended, he would not be able to give away the identity of many others in the net. And to be effective, the individuals who constitute a communications net of this kind must have radios. Quite possibly, these would serve as a major means of internal communication, and certainly they have to be in a position to receive communications from outside and to send them by radio.

Given a command and control net that is secure, it then becomes possible to have guerrilla groups which by their very nature are more numerous, less well trained, therefore, less susceptible to tight discipline, and much less able to be secure than those who comprise the "net." If there's a guerrilla band of twenty men, it's just inevitable that if one of them is picked up, he knows the identities of the other twenty. But if your basic communication with actual groups of dissidents and also with all kinds of groups of would-be dissidents inside the country. Furthermore, there's no need for one group of dissidents to know the identity of another group. There can be some university students in a cell, and there can be some guys in the Escambray, and there can be some industrial workers who are still at their jobs, and they don't need to know one another.

[-29-]

It's in this way that something that can be called a controllable and reasonably disciplined resistance movement can be, and has to be, built up. A resistance that is held together by this kind of net, then, becomes a collection of forces from which operational intelligence can be quickly obtained and to which information and instructions can be given. For instance, if you have an organization of this kind, a group that wants and needs an air drop of supplies, and is in a place in the country where it can receive it, can communicate (a) its needs, and (b) where it is and when it will be there and what the recognition signal will be, and you can organize these things.

In the course of the autumn I don't know how many air drops were made, and I think one was reasonably successful, but only one of the entire series. For the most part, after an air drop had been carried out in response to a request that had been forwarded in a cumbersome chain through Havana and the U.S. Embassy, we never knew whether the recipients had been anywhere near the drop zone and they never knew whether the aircraft had been anywhere near what they thought was the drop zone. I certainly felt that I received a liberal education in the fact that what I've called a communications and command and control net of some sort, an underground, is doomed to ineffectiveness.

Well, for a whole lot of reasons—and some of them, I'm sure, reasons that I have never understood—the efforts during the late summer and autumn to build an underground

of this sort, specifically to establish contact with guerrilla groups, to send in a radio operator and technician to each so that they'd communicate to the outside, to identify and recruit agents in fishing villages who were reliable people with whom communications would be possible for infiltration by small boats, all of these efforts failed abysmally. In late autumn we had a number of very successful small boat infiltrations of supplies and people, but as a general rule, the people were picked up within forty-eight hours and the supplies immediately thereafter. Why? Because when you land guys on a beach at night, even if it's completely secure and they're completely safe and, after all, are of the nationality of the country and all the rest of it, there has to be a house in a village nearby where they can go and sleep and get a meal. Then there has to be another place to

[-30-]

pass them along to. This simply was not accomplished. That being the case, the dissidents inside Cuba at the time of the Castro uprising were a very diverse group, or set of groups of people. Mainly, the dissidents were people who were emotionally in opposition to Castro, but not in any kind of organizational framework. And short of a broadcast on the radio, there wasn't any way to communicate with these people. There was still a few with whom we could communicate but very, very few. The whole effort, of course, was to make this invasion a tactical surprise, which it was. To that end it, of course, was quite out of the question to warn Castro semi-publicly by broadcasting to the dissidents that something was going to happen on such and such a day.

One of the myths of the discussions of that operation, a myth that's uttered by many Cubans, too, is to the effect that there was an organized underground with which communication was possible, which could have been warned to get out of the way on a certain date so as to avoid arrest without giving the date away to Castro. That is a myth. There probably weren't more than a dozen people, if that many, inside of Cuba to whom it was possible, with any security what ever, to communicate let alone given an order and expect to have it carried out.

One of the lessons that can be drawn from this is that the whole thing should have been aborted, not just after Kennedy came into office but way back in November when it was pretty clear that the effort to build an underground wasn't working. Here again this is where one, both at the time and looking back on it, has a feeling of inevitability. A great effort had been mounted, let us say, by November, and there seemed to be really no pressing reason then for giving it up. What I think we did not foresee as early even as December is that there plainly wasn't going to be time to start all over again at the building of an underground and have that job done before the rainy season. Because it seemed that there wasn't time to do that job and because we were quite aware that it had not been a success, everyone concerned began to pay more and more attention gradually to the other alternative.

[END OF INTERVIEW #1]

[-31-]

Richard Bissel Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
Name Index

A

Amory, Robert, Jr., 24

B

Berle, Adolf A., Jr., 27
Bundy, McGeorge, 20, 23
Burke, Arleigh Albert, 13, 27

C

Cabell, Charles Pearre, 13
Castro, Fidel, 6, 13, 18, 19, 28, 31
Clay, Lucius Dubignon, Sr., 20
Cooper, Chester, 20, 22

D

Dulles, Allen W., 3, 13

F

Fulbright, J. William, 26

G

Gray, David W., 11, 13, 15, 19, 27

K

Kennedy, John F., 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14,
15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27,
31

L

Lemnitzer, Lyman L., 13, 27

M

Mann, Thomas Clifton, 27
McNamara, Robert S., 20, 27
Miguel, Ydigoras Fuentes, 5

N

Nitze, Paul Henry, 20, 27

R

Rusk, Dean, 8, 9, 14, 20

S

Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr., 15, 16