Richard Bissell, Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 7/5/1967
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Biographical Note
Bissell, Deputy Director of Plans for the Central Intelligence Agency from 1959 to 1962, discusses the Bay of Pigs invasion and its aftermath, including the decision not to support the invaders with air strikes, and investigations by the CIA Inspector General and General Maxwell D. Taylor, among other issues.

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Revision of the Gift of Personal Statement

of Richard M. Bissell, jr.

to the

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

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Gift of Personal Statement

By Richard M. Bissell, jr.

to the

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

19 January 1972
Date

James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

January 26, 1972
Date

Richard Bissell—JFK #2

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Second of Two Oral History Interviews

with

Richard Bissell

East Hartford, Connecticut
July 5, 1967

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BISSELL: What were you going to ask?

O'CONNOR: Well, I was simply curious to know whether or not the intelligence side of the CIA was involved in attempts to set up, prior to the Bay of Pigs invasion, a communications net or a communications organization of dissident elements within Cuba.

BISSELL: It was not involved. I've used the terms the intelligence side of the Agency to refer to that part of it which, in those days, was under the Deputy Director, Intelligence. All of these components of the Agency were concerned in one way or another with intelligence analysis and intelligence interpretation. They did not at any time have operational responsibilities. On the operational side, the responsibility for clandestine intelligence collection was with the same organization that was responsible for all other operational matters. Hence, it was natural and in accord with normal procedure that the intelligence side of the Agency didn't have anything to do with the operation.

O'CONNOR: I was going to ask you if it would have been better if they had, but apparently it just doesn't enter into the question.

BISSELL: It didn't, really. That question never arose.

O'CONNOR: Okay. In connection with the men who were training, evidently the men who were training in Guatemala thought that there would be more support from the United States than actually was forthcoming or than had ever been decided to put forth. Do you know how that misunderstanding of misconception arose?

BISSELL: Well, I don't know how much of a misconception there was, nor do I know when any misconception arose. I can make some guesses, however, as to when and how. The reason I say that I don't know how much of a misconception there was is that the instructions that went out were very clear throughout the whole period of training, to the effect that U.S. forces would not become involved in any way in the attack against Castro [Fidel Castro]. In the late stages of the training, actually only days before the deployment of the force was to be started, this report kept recurring in Washington that the trainees had been told that they would receive U.S. military support, air cover, or naval support or whatever form it might take.

So at that late stage the Marine colonel, whom I have referred to before, who was the senior military officer in charge of this activity on my staff, was dispatched to Nicaragua where the embarkation was taking place, the primary purpose being a last minute assessment of the brigade. A mission of almost equal importance was again to make clear to its officers that they could not expect any direct U.S. military support. I have every reason to believe that he made just this explanation to them. My own belief is that probably at that stage of the game when they were highly confident of success, at least in the early part of their plan, the issue didn't bulk large in their minds and they probably accepted these assurances. My feeling is that when, not having achieved command of the air, they found themselves in a desperate situation, they were obviously hoping that U.S. forces would come to their assistance in some way or other. They probably knew there was a carrier offshore, they probably saw U.S. military aircraft in the area and hoped for the best. And it's very easy under these circumstances for the hope to be translated into a belief

that further support had been promised.

However, I do have a further surmise. Over the months and especially the last few weeks of training, the Americans who were doing the training were and had to be very close to the Cubans. The American trainers were, I think, almost as much emotionally involved in this operation as any of the Cubans themselves. I have little doubt that on occasion the Americans gave some impressions that perhaps they didn't intend, but in any event gave rise to some impressions that went beyond any explicit instructions. I think it's perfectly possible that at one time or another they may have said, “Well, if you really get in trouble, you can be sure that the U.S. will be in a position where it will have to

intervene to help you out." This is my own surmise as to how any such belief came into being.

I might say that I don't mean by these remarks to accuse the Americans in any deliberate sense of going beyond their instructions. I would be very surprised if they had ever said, "We know that you will be helped," or "we have been authorized to say…." What they might perfectly well have done, what any one of us might have done under the circumstances, was to say, "Once this operation is started, some inexorable pressures will be developed, and there's a very good chance that under those extreme pressures the U.S. government will change its mind."

O'CONNOR: In connection with these men who were training, there is also a very curious remark made by Haynes Johnson in a book that he's written about this to the effect that the American advisors to the trainees told them that in the event the operation should be cancelled for political reasons in Washington, the trainees were to take the American advisors prisoner and carry out the operation on their own. Do you have any comments on that?

BISSELL: The only comment is, in effect, about the same one I've made in answer to your last question. I personally think there's very little likelihood that there is any truth in this story. I've heard the story; it's been repeated in a number of places. If there is any truth to it, I am sure that this was the sort of interchange that would have taken place over a drink between an American and the Cubans. It would have been partly facetious; it would have been an expression of the American's passionate hope that the operation would be allowed to proceed, and almost certainly not intended to be taken seriously. My own feeling is, in other words, that people who've heard of such a remark are reading into it an intent and a background that were not there.

O'CONNOR: How well informed was the Revolutionary Council as to the specifics of the operation?

BISSELL: Not very well informed, and for the reason that we felt their security was extremely poor. Indeed, just before the operation was launched, they were, you remember, with their own consent moved, as I remember it, to a hotel or a house where they were out of communication. The reason for this, as explained to them was that success depended absolutely on maintaining security, and that regardless of how secure the individual members might be and might believe that they were, one simply couldn't have that assurance about the whole entourage. At the time, that's to say prior to the failure, they were inclined to accept that explanation.

O'CONNOR: Whose decision was it to move them to the house, in effect, to keep them incommunicado for the period of the invasion?

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BISSELL: Well, it was certainly a decision made in the CIA. It was also a decision known to the State Department people concerned.

O'CONNOR: Before the invasion took place, shortly before, just barely before, apparently statements were coming out of New York stemming from the Revolutionary Council, which helped, it would seem, to break down the cover story. These might have been reports put out which were guesses rather than based on any actual knowledge by the Revolutionary Council, but at any rate they do seem to have generated suspicion and to have undermined the cover story. And I wondered if you, in reconsidering this at all, would think it would have been better to have more fully informed the Council?

BISSELL: The Council was, according to my recollection, perfectly well aware that there was a military organization in training; they were aware that this training was being financed and organized and conducted, really, by the CIA for the U.S. government; they knew where it was going on; and they knew most of the personalities who were in the training camp. As a matter of fact, three members of the Council, you know, made a visit to the training camp. That's also been a matter of public record. So they were not actually in ignorance of, broadly, what was being prepared, nor did they gain their information of it by rumor or in any way other than by direct communication from their CIA contacts. So as far as breaking down the cover story is concerned, they were pretty fully informed of the circumstances, which became increasingly public knowledge. What they were not informed of was the date of embarkation, the port of embarkation, the planned date of the actual invasion itself, or the details of the military plan.

O'CONNOR: All right, getting back…

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BISSELL: Now let me, however, face your question: would it have been better to have taken them more into confidence? I'll answer that with two remarks. First, the reason that the Council, we felt at the time, could not be given a more active and authoritative role in organizing the training and in directing the use of the military unit was that the Council itself was, as I've said to you before, not too well unified. There were jealousies and rivalries among its members, and, more important, all the members of the Council were by no means *persona grata* to the men in the training camps. As a matter of fact, there was quite a lot of ill feeling from the military brigade toward the Council. One of the reasons for the visit down there was to try to reestablish a rapport, which I think was fairly successful. In the training camp the effort had to be to build a unified disciplined military force with a real sense of unity of purpose. The members of the Council, some of them at least, were consistently disposed to try to

play upon their relations with particular individuals or groups in the training camps. So, my first remark, to repeat it, is that the Council was neither sufficiently unified, sufficiently free of it is internal political rivalries, nor sufficiently respected by the military group to permit the giving to the Council of a really major command and control role in the operation.

The second one is that, doing it over again, considerations of security in the most elementary sense would again, I think, have to be accorded about the same importance. The Council was very leaky. It was impossible to keep secrets at all closely in that group. And again, the reason was that they mistrusted one another; some of them were maneuvering for advantage within the whole refugee anti-Castro movement. In that atmosphere, to have entrusted them with the details of a plan the success of which depended completely on secrecy, I think, would have been impossible.

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O'CONNOR: Something that we talked about last time is the cancellation of the second air strike, and it has been said—I'd like to have you discuss this again briefly if you would—it has been said that the effect of this cancellation was not sufficiently made known to John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]. I'd like to know if you agree with that. And if you do, why do you think it was not made known?

BISSELL: Well, I think I do agree with hindsight. But the answer to the question of why it wasn't sufficiently made known to him is very complex, and I don't know that even with hindsight I can give a good answer. I can say this: In a meeting that General Cabell [Charles Pearre Cabell] and I had with Dean Rusk early Sunday evening, which has been described in various books, he offered us the chance to speak to the President on the telephone in his presence and seek a reversal of that decision. We did not take that opportunity, feeling, frankly, that the cause was hopeless. Rusk had called the President; Rusk had laid this matter before the President; Rusk had told the President that we felt very strongly that this strike was a military necessity. Rusk had then stated his own reasons why given developments in the U.N., another air strike would be politically disastrous and the President, to Rusk, had reaffirmed his decision. Cabell and I felt that there really was a negligible chance that we could induce the President to change his mind.

Moreover, I think it has to be repeated that in some quarters, at least, there was a doubt as to whether the air strike was such an absolute necessity. Dean Rusk himself had been a participant in World War II operations in Burma of an irregular warfare type, and he had said on a number of occasions that operations of this sort did not depend nearly so heavily on air cover as did conventional amphibious operations by organized troops.

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More than that, a fact that is very little known is that the Joint Chiefs more than once in their discussions of the operation had expressed some doubt about the

absolute essentiality of these air strikes. I don't want this remark to be subject in any way to the interpretation that the Joint Chiefs did not favor these air strikes, or did not believe that they improved the military chances. But they attached less critical importance to them than did, for instance, the Marine colonel, who was really in direct charge of the planning of the operation. I think that knowledge of this attitude on the part of the Joint Chiefs may have had a little influence on General Cabell's and my decision that we wouldn't pursue the matter further with the President that Sunday night. I think knowledge of this attitude by the Joint Chiefs may well have been reported to the President, although it never was in my hearing. And if so, I'm sure it would have influenced him very significantly.

Later that night General Cabell went and made another appeal, first to Rusk and then, from Rusk's apartment, on the telephone to the President. This was an appeal for the authority to use U.S. Naval air—I think it was in as far as the three mile limit. This was a much milder request than the request for another strategic strike by the Cuban aircraft. And yet it was turned down by the President. I must admit I have always taken that as an indication, as has Cabell, that our original judgment was correct, that the President would not have been moved by our appeal to him. I still think it was a mistake on our part not to make the appeal.

O'CONNOR: I was under the impression General Cabell in his later request to the President for some sort of air cover was that this request was approved. That was the impression that I had.

BISSELL: No, there was one that was approved, but that particular one later that Night, I know was not approved. But I'm afraid I don't know precisely what it was.

O'CONNOR: In one of the books on this subject it is said that you and Admiral Burke [Arleigh Albert Burke] and General Lemnitzer [Lyman L. Lemnitzer] did plead at one time or another directly to the President for air cover for the beaches. Did you...

BISSELL: Well, Monday night we did do that. That was twenty-four hours later and after the Brigade was already in very deep trouble. That was either Monday night or Tuesday night—it was Tuesday night, I believe.

O'CONNOR: What was the President's attitude at that point?

BISSELL: That's the time he did grant one hour of action by Navy aircraft to protect the Cuban B-26's, but it was abortive in the sense that

the rendezvous was never successfully made. I think another B-26 was shot down at a time when its crew thought they were within the one hour time period.

O'CONNOR: By the way, you don't know how that confusion over the time…

BISSELL: I've never gotten to the bottom of that, never.

O'CONNOR: Well, in view of your feeling on Sunday night that the President probably would not accede to a request for a second air strike or for additional air cover, do you feel that you or anyone else in the CIA failed in any way in presenting the importance of this air cover or air power to the President?

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BISSELL: Yes, I do. I think, as I said a moment ago, not only should we have insisted on speaking to the President that evening—although I still believe that that wouldn't have made any difference—but I have the feeling that in the previous discussions this point of military doctrine, the absolute essentiality of command of the air for the success of this sort of operation, I feel this point had somehow not been given—we hadn't succeeded in giving it the emphasis that it deserved.

O'CONNOR: And you would include then, also, that the Joint Chiefs of Staff or their representatives as well had not given it the emphasis…

BISSELL: I believe that to be true, yes.

O'CONNOR: The CIA has taken a great deal of the responsibility for this…. A great deal of the criticism, at any rate, is focused on the CIA, and I wonder if you would care to comment on where you think additional responsibility lies, with regard to the failure of the operation. Now this is, again, ground that we have dealt with and covered before, but I'm particularly interested in who you consider at fault in areas aside from the CIA.

BISSELL: I think the only way that I can answer that question, and I am being completely honest in giving this answer, is that this decision was participated in, as is a matter of record, by a lot of people and a lot of parts of the government. I suspect that some of the individuals who were involved in the many meetings with the President and who were finally asked by the President to give their recommendations in the meeting where an affirmative decision was reached, feel, or would argue, that they were led astray by the CIA; that we were the operating organization; and that they pretty much had to accept our estimates of the likelihood of success. I think to a degree, and in the case of some individuals and organizations, that's a valid argument. I

think it's fair to say that neither the President nor most of his political advisors, especially I'm thinking of the State Department people,

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could have been expected to form an independent judgment of the likelihood of a military success. That kind of judgment is always, of course, a complex one and, as I think I said to you when we were talking about this before, the only judgment you can make is a probability judgment. The one that was made—and was supported, de facto, by the Chiefs of Staff—was that there was a considerably better than even chance of success in the first phase, that is, in establishing a beachhead.

So if we absolve the people who participated in the decision but who couldn't be expected on their own authority or knowledge to review that judgment, you then have to say that insofar as that judgment, in turn, was proven to have been false, the blame lies with the people to whom the President did look for such an assessment. And that was the CIA and the Joint Chiefs and the Joint Staff.

I think one point that has to be made here is that if you make a probability judgment that outcome “A” is twice as likely as outcome “B” and then “B” is what turns up, that doesn't necessarily prove the original judgment was wrong because that's the character of probability judgments. It's a two to one chance of “A”; it's still a one in three chance of “B”; and if you do it only once, “B” can be the one that turns up, and it still doesn't prove that the original assessment of probability was wrong.

But to come back to your question and pursue it a bit further. I think that the responsibility for the military assessment, it has to be said, did rest between the CIA and the Joint Chiefs. The Joint Chiefs had certain advantages in making such an assessment. First, they commanded military expertise, which the CIA possessed only in the persons of officers assigned to it. And secondly, this wasn't a military operation under the command or cognizance of the Joint Chiefs and, therefore, one presumes that they could be objective about it. However, you have to set against that the fact that, ultimately, the responsibility is much heavier on the people who are in the line of command.

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So I think I would summarize what I've been saying here as follows: if the military assessment was at fault, and as a probability statement I'm not sure to this day that it was—I know that long after the event, General Gray [David W. Gray], I believe, would have defended the original probability judgment as probably having been correct—but if that was at fault, I think some of the blame falls on the Joint Chiefs and the Joint Staff.

There were other non-military judgments involved. I think I said to you last time that to my mind one of the most serious errors was a failure to realize how thoroughly the disclaimability by the U.S. government of this operation had been compromised. This failure to realize that the whole world accepted what was going on as a U.S. government operation, on the one hand induced the political authorities in Washington, who didn't much like it, nevertheless to go along with it. But on the other hand, this unclear view of how the whole operation looked to the public prevented the Administration from

philosophically accepting a degree of responsibility and then authorizing some of the actions that could have greatly enhanced the chances of success that I mentioned to you, I'm quite sure, the possibility of making considerably more use of American volunteers and especially American volunteer air crews, and perhaps using some more sophisticated aircraft. Now, If I'm correct in diagnosing this as one of the mistakes of judgment, and I'm very sure that I am, I believe the blame for this error in judgment is much more widespread.

O'CONNOR: Well, do you think particularly in the State Department?

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BISSELL: I feel quite strongly that the State Department, especially, should have been more—I was going to say more aware, and yet that isn't quite the phrase that I want to use because, of course, they were well aware of what was coming out in the press; we all were. But I think the State Department, as well as the CIA, and even to a degree the Pentagon, should have been clearer on the significance of the climate of public discussion that had grown up. I think they should have realized that however much we might legalistically say the operation was disclaimable by the U.S. government because nobody could actually prove that a U.S. government authorized representative had dealt with the Cubans, this sort of rather legalistic defense was almost irrelevant.

The fact of the matter was that this had about it, to all other Americans and to everybody else, clearly the earmarks of a U.S. operation. I feel that the State Department is at least as much to blame as we are. And I think I may say that in this respect the President and his own advisors have to share a significant part of the blame because this judgment that I'm talking about, the assessment of how this looked from outside of Washington, and then, given how it looked, how should you handle it, these are judgments that are not highly technical; there is no reason to expect the military to be particularly good at them. Unfortunately, there's no reason to expect the CIA to be any better at these than the other parts of the civilian administration. So I'm not trying to get out of a fair share of the blame for this mistake, but I do think the blame was widely shared.

O'CONNOR: All right. I have the impression that the CIA generally runs a sort of a self-inspection for all continuing operations through the Inspector General's office or something of this sort. Was this sort of thing carried out in connection with the…

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BISSELL: It was afterwards, yes.

O'CONNOR: Yes, I know it was afterwards, but I was under the impression that, as an operation is progressing, often a representative of the Inspector General or something like that…

BISSELL: That very rarely is the case, very rarely.

O'CONNOR: Oh, I see. I see. Was the question ever brought up in this case that you're aware of?

BISSELL: No, never that I'm aware of. Never until well after the fact.

O' CONNOR: Well, were there any people within the CIA who were, let's say, opposed to this operation, or who were criticizing it perhaps as it went along, that you were aware of?

BISSELL: No. As you probably know, Kirkpatrick [Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, Jr.], the Inspector General, ultimately issued an unfavorable report. That was entirely an after the fact report, and I am unaware of any time when the operation was in progress when he expressed any considerable concern about it. My own hunch is that very possibly Dick Helms [Richard M. Helms], who was then my deputy and now the Director, and some others in the operational side of the CIA, in the clandestine service, were gravely concerned about an operation that had become so big and so public. But they did not, in fact, raise any of these doubts with me or, to the best of my knowledge and belief, with Dulles [Allen W. Dulles] or Cabell while the operation was in progress.

O'CONNOR: In connection with the, well, really, the two inspections or two investigations that went on after the fact, the President's committee of inspectors…

BISSELL: You mean the one that was headed by General Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor]?

O'CONNOR: Right.

BISSELL: Yes.

O'CONNOR: Right. Well, do you have any comments on first of all, the one that was headed by General Taylor, on the satisfactoriness of this investigation. Do you have any criticisms or comments of that investigation?

BISSELL: No, I thought that was a very thorough and, on the whole, a very fair-minded inquiry.

O'CONNOR: Was it as thorough as the CIA's own investigation?

BISSELL: I would say it was as thorough in the sense that it probed as deeply into the whole progress of the operation, its successive phases. It did not inquire into what I will call organizational matters and personnel assignments and things of this kind within the CIA as deeply as Kirkpatrick did—for the obvious reason that it was really done by senior people: Burke, Dulles, and the Attorney General [Robert F. Kennedy], and they simply didn't know people within the Agency as well or the organization in as much detail.

O'CONNOR: Well, I take it that the CIA's investigation, its own investigation, was more directly concerned with the CIA rather than the broader aspects.

BISSELL: That's correct, yes.

O'CONNOR: Well, do you have any comments or criticisms of that investigation or of the report? Did you read the report?

BISSELL: Oh, yes. I read the report, and I wrote, in fact, a rejoinder to the report. Yes, I would have some pretty strong comments on that. I think some of the points made in the report were well made, but I thought this was a typical report that uses hindsight illegitimately for criticism. I would have to go back and get my hands on and read parts of the I.G.'s [Inspector General] report, and parts of our own comment thereon to go into it in any detail, which I would be rather reluctant to do, anyway, I think. But I felt that it had internal inconsistencies in it, and that generally the broad criticism to be made of it, which I would not make of the Taylor report, was that it did take advantage of hindsight and, in effect, criticized the participants for judgments that allegedly turned out to be incorrect after the fact, rather than trying to assess them on the basis of the evidence available to those who made them when they made them.

O'CONNOR: Well, the Director of the CIA, I think, has referred to that report as a hatchet job. You would go along with that?

BISSELL: I would agree with that, yes.

O'CONNOR: Well, that's a rather strange situation. I wonder if there were any personality conflicts which might have led to this sort of thing. Was the Inspector General attempting to…. Do you think his motives were base in any way?

BISSELL: Yes, but I think maybe this is as much as I will say. I think it probably doesn't serve any good purpose to go beyond because one then begins to get into a matter of voicing views on motivations.

O'CONNOR: Okay.

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BISSELL: I will simply say that the then Inspector General was known to be, to I think everyone that knew him, extremely ambitious. He was an individual who, as I felt well before this incident, was not above using his reports and his analysis of situations to exert an influence in the direction that he chose, and these directions were, not always but sometimes, tied up with his own personal ambitions. I think in this case he had a number of purposes he was trying to serve, more or less of that character. But I don't really think it does any good to go any deeper into that.

O'CONNOR: All right. Much has been made of John Kennedy's accepting responsibility for this operation publicly, and in particular, people have complimented him very, very sincerely for directing that there should be no personal recriminations or anything of this sort. I wondered if your own personal experience after the Bay of Pigs would lead you to believe that that is sincerely the way he felt, or this was sincerely the way he felt.

BISSELL: I think it was sincerely the way he felt, yes.

O'CONNOR: I wondered if he had ever expressed to you, or to others which came back to you, an irritation with the CIA, or with anyone in particular.

BISSELL: I talked to him, oh, probably a couple of times beyond the immediate aftermath about it. He was always extremely generous as far as I personally was concerned. I never heard him express directly any criticism. I get the impression mainly, I suppose, from comments repeated by others that he had a mixture of attitudes. First of all, I think he very sincerely meant no recriminations. I think he

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wished strongly to discourage people in the State Department or on his own staff who might have been critical of the CIA, from voicing this criticism either with the Administration or outside. I think he wished genuinely to discourage in the aftermath of a disaster the kind of mutual recrimination that would reduce the effectiveness of cooperation between the agencies. I believe from everything I've ever heard that he quite genuinely had… [Tape turned off—resumes]

O'CONNOR: Do you feel the Bay of Pigs seriously undermined John Kennedy's confidence in the CIA? His confidence apparently was very high when he first came into office.

BISSELL: I was in the middle of saying that I thought he had genuinely not only

desire to avoid recriminations among members of the Administration, but that he himself had no strongly adverse feelings toward any of the people involved. I think he felt that the responsibility for the decisions had indeed been rather widely diffused in the Administration and that even in his own mind he was not prepared to pick out a few people and mentally place the blame on them. I do not think it shook his confidence, therefore, in the basic competence or loyalty of people in the Agency. I know that he felt there had to be a change at the top of the Agency. I know that he felt there had to be a change at the top of the Agency because he told me that perfectly straightforwardly. And his comment was that if this had been a cabinet government, he would have resigned; but being the kind of government it is, somebody else had to; and inevitably, he thought, this had to be Allen Dulles and Pearre Cabell.

I suppose it did, in part, undermine his confidence in the Agency. Perhaps, however, it would be more accurate to say that it definitely undermined his confidence in the decision-making process with respect to major Agency activities. I think what he felt most strongly, perhaps, was not that the CIA as such had revealed grave deficiencies, but that as decisions had been made in the Administration concerning CIA activities, the process of making such decisions and of assessing the opportunities and the risks was deficient and had to be quite radically changed.

Now, of course, in the event, there were no radical changes or sudden changes made in either the Agency or the decision-making process; the changes in personalities were made. Gradually over a period of years there have been important changes, in my view, in the role of the CIA. I've had a chance to observe these, and in no significant degree, really, were they set in motion by actions taken under Kennedy. For the most part they have not been the result of initiatives taken from the White House and resulting in instructions to the Director of CIA. They've been changes of another sort that have grown more from within the Agency and from the evolution of its relationships with the Pentagon than they have from any White House instituted moves, at least to the best of my information.

O'CONNOR: It has been said that greater outside supervision of the CIA would have, perhaps, avoided the situation of the Bay of Pigs. I understand that John Kennedy took steps to…

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE II]

BISSELL: It is true that he reactivated the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board to take that one first. I think he may have increased its effectiveness and its vigor. My recollection is that he did this even before the Bay of Pigs, but it may have been afterward.

O'CONNOR: It was May, 1961, so it was immediately afterward.

BISSELL: It was immediately afterwards. But my answer to your question is that

I don't really think that a committee of that kind, meeting less often than once a month, meeting for a day at a time, necessarily reviewing matters of structure and doctrine and operating philosophy, I don't think that it could have, in fact, offered any safeguard against the sorts of errors of judgment that were made in the Bay of Pigs operation.

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I don't know to what extent it can be said that Kennedy further activated the 5412 Committee. That had existed, of course, for years. It had been much more active in the last year or year and a half of the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration than previously. My recollection is that its functioning did not change greatly under Kennedy. It is true that beginning a few months after the Bay of Pigs the activities of the 5412 Committee were somewhat formalized, and another committee on, as I remember it, insurgency and counterinsurgency was established with about the same membership. For a time, General Taylor was chairman of both of these.

I think it is fair to say that in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, especially the 5412 Committee was much more conscious of its responsibility and reviewed proposed operations both more rigorously and more formally than it had before. I suspect that change has persisted. It is my own view, again, however, that nothing of that sort would have made any significant difference in this case because, after all, the one point never to be forgotten about the Bay of Pigs was that the plans for that activity and its progress were meticulously reviewed for weeks before it came off by the President and the whole circle of his advisors, and in even more detail daily by a committee of the Joint Staff for the Pentagon, and by a group in the Western Hemisphere bureau of the State Department who were working actively on the political aspects of it. All that the 5412 Committee does is to bring these operations before the scrutiny of top people in State, Defense, and the White House. This operation and any others of this magnitude have always been under the scrutiny of these same individuals when the operations were imminent or in progress. And having a more formalized committee wouldn't have made its members any wiser. So I think the answer has to be that if there's anything clear on the record of the Bay of Pigs, it is that lack of supervision and coordination was not the reason for failure.

[END SIDE II, TAPE II]

[END OF INTERVIEW #2]

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