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Censoring the 'perfect failure'

At 4 a.m. on Jan. 1, 1959, an hour when there were never commercial flights from Havana, David Atlee Phillips was lounging in a lawn chair there, sipping champagne after a New Year's Eve party, when a commercial aircraft flew low over his house. He surmised that dictator Fulgencio Batista was fleeing because Fidel Castro was arriving. He was right. Soon he, and many others, would be spectacularly wrong about Cuba.

According to Jim Rasenberger's history of the Bay of Pigs invasion, "The Brilliant Disaster," Phillips was "a handsome 37-year-old former stage actor" who "had been something of a dilettante before joining the CIA." There, however, he was an expert. And in April 1960, he assured Richard Bissell, the CIA's invasion mastermind, that within six months radio propaganda would produce "the proper psychological climate" for the invasion to trigger a mass Cuban uprising against Castro.

The invasion brigade had only about 1,400 members but began its members' serial numbers at 2,500 to trick Castro into thinking it was larger. Castro's 32,000-man army was supplemented by 200,000 to 300,000 militia members. U.S. intelligence was ignorant of everything from Castro's capabilities to Cuba's geography to Cubans' psycholo-

Fifty-two years and many misadventures later, the invasion still fascinates us, in historian Theodore Draper's description, "one of those rare events in history — a perfect failure." It had a perverse fecundity.

It led to President John Kennedy's decision to demonstrate toughness by deepening U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Rasenberger writes that, three weeks after the April 1961 invasion, Kennedy sent Vice President Lyndon Johnson to Saigon: "Johnson's assignment was to deliver a message to [South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh] Diem that the United States intended to fully support the South Vietnamese effort to beat the Communists." (Thirty months later, the United States was complicit in the military coup — regime change — in which Diem was murdered.) The Bay of Pigs led to Nikita Khrushchev's disastrous treatment of Kennedy at the June summit in Vienna, and to Khrushchev being emboldened to put missiles in Cuba.

In 1979, the Bay of Pigs made a cameo appearance in the Watergate shambles, which involved some Cubans and Americans active in the invasion. On the June 23 "smoking gun" Oval Office tape, Richard Nixon directs his aide H.R. Haldeman to urge the CIA to tell the FBI to back off from investigating the burglary by saying, "Look, the problem is that this will open the whole Bay of Pigs thing."

Surely this "thing" should be studied as deeply as possible. Unfortunately, the CIA, which you might think had made every mistake possible regarding the invasion, is now making another. It is resisting attempts to force the release of the fifth and final volume of its official history of it.

This autumn, a federal appeals court is expected to hear arguments about disclosing the document written in 1981 by CIA historian Jack Pfeiffer, who retired in 1984 and died in 1997. The National Security Archive, a private research institution and library, is arguing that no important government interest is served by the continuing suppression of a 32-year-old report about a 52-year-old event.

The CIA admits that the volume contains only a small amount of still-classified information. It argues, however, that it should be covered by the "deliberative process privilege" that makes it exempt from release under the Freedom of Information Act. The argument is that, for some unclear reason, release of this volume, unlike the release of the first four volumes, would threaten the process by which the CIA's histories are written. Supposedly candid histories will not be written if the writers know that, decades later, their work will become public.

This unpersuasive worry — an excuse for the selective censorship of perhaps embarrassing scholarship — is surely more flimsy than the public's solid interest in information. And the government's interest.

In his 1998 book "Secrecy: The American Experience," Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan argued that secrecy makes government stupid by keeping secrets from itself. Information is property, and government agencies hoard it. For example, in the 1940s, U.S. military code breakers read 2,900 communications between Moscow and its agents in America. So, while the nation was torn by bitter disagreements about whether Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs committed espionage, the military knew they had. But it kept the proof from other parts of the government, including President Harry Truman.

America needs all the caution its history of misadventures — a record recently enriched by Syria — should encourage. Since the Bay of Pigs, caution has been scarcer than information justifying it.

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