



Understanding the CIA : How Covert (and Overt) Operations Were Proposed and Approved during the Cold War

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New Collection of Declassified Documents Illuminates the Role of Presidents and Top Advisers in Guiding and Sanctioning CIA Activities from Cuba to Africa, 1961-1974

A Gift to Bokassa and Exploiting Personal Characteristics of Fidel Castro Were Among Methods Used

Washington, DC, March 4, 2019 – The covert operations of the Central Intelligence Agency are one element of the forward edge of power in U.S. foreign policy. But the CIA is not a lone ranger, shooting up saloons on its own account. A senior interagency group within the United States government acts as the high command of the secret war. Today, the National Security Archive is posting a collection of documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act and extended archival research that illustrates some of the breadth of the group's activity as it evolved during the Cold War.

Today's selection is a tiny fragment of an extensive new compilation, *CIA Covert Operations III: From Kennedy to Nixon, 1961-1974*, published recently as part of the Digital National Security Archive (DNSA) through the scholarly publisher ProQuest and

available by subscription and at many major libraries. This is the third part of a National Security Archive series on the CIA's clandestine side, curated by Pulitzer-nominated author and historian John Prados.

This edition takes the story from the epic disaster of the Bay of Pigs through a series of little-known or under-explored covert activities including the Mongoose operation against Cuba, actions in British Guiana, Bolivia, Indonesia, the Dominican Republic, Iraq (the Kurds), and more. The set provides unprecedented, in-depth coverage of the CIA's high command, ranging from minutes of the "Special Group" that approved covert operations, to CIA directors' daily staff meetings, to the notes of meetings with presidents Kennedy and Johnson made by CIA Director John A. McCone.

Among other things today's selection shows:

- *CIA Director Allen W. Dulles made a bid in June 1961 for this "Special Group" to have an autonomous ability to approve covert operations (Document 1).*
- *In early 1962 the CIA's top lawyer relied upon presidents' Article 2 powers under the Constitution, and on the notion Congress approved by appropriation, to justify covert operations. He warned that no statute actually authorized covert operations (Document 4).*
- *President Kennedy's brother, Robert F. Kennedy, in March 1962 brought up personal characteristics and known acquaintances of Fidel Castro as things which could be exploited in efforts to neutralize the Cuban leader (Document 6).*
- *Actions of the CIA's own Cuban exile allies in March 1963 caused the high command to reconsider its alliance with them against Castro (Document 8).*
- *CIA Director John A. McCone, one member of the high command group, spent a great deal of his time pressing an aggressive anti-Cuba strategy even while recognizing that U.S. efforts were doomed to failure (Documents 8, 9, 10).*
- *When taking charge of the United States government after the death of President Kennedy, at his first meeting with the high command on December 19, 1963, President Lyndon Johnson proved cautious, initially not approving additional strikes against Cuba (Document 12).*
- *Overseers of the CIA's secret warriors at the White House level was the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB). The oversight mechanism could be distracted by extraneous events in the intelligence field. For example, the PFIAB meeting (August 8-9, 1964) closest to the Gulf of Tonkin incident (August 2 & 4) was preoccupied with the discovery of Russian microphone devices inside the great seal of the United States at the Moscow embassy (Document 14).*
- *Lyndon Johnson showed his distaste for "continuing subsidies" to political parties of a close American ally in July 1966 when a CIA political action was up for renewal. His decision foreshadowed the end of the CIA project in Italy (Document 15).*
- *President Richard Nixon's high command in July 1972 approved a \$20,000 (\$120,000 in 2018 dollars) "gift" to the Central African Republic dictator, Jean-Bedel Bokassa (Document 18).*

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The High Command of the Secret War: Exhibits from the CIA, 1961-1974

By John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi

Intelligence practice has always been a matter of indirection, secrecy and deceit. In United States covert operations this has included applying the technique of “plausible deniability.” Under that concept operations and activities are carried out in such fashion as to keep hidden the hand of the CIA or the United States, or in other ways to make it possible to deny U.S. involvement. In recent history plausible deniability has eroded somewhat, as American presidents sought open monetary appropriations for “overt covert” operations, or, in the war on terror, dispensed with the “plausible” and simply denied what they could be seen to be doing. But during the Cold War era—and here the presidents under consideration are John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon—plausible deniability was standard procedure.

The CIA and other spy agencies have used plausible deniability, in particular, to insulate presidents from charges they had had a hand in, or had even approved, covert operations. But maintaining this fiction put a special premium on the approval and management of these activities by organs of government beyond the CIA itself. In the United States this became a function of the National Security Council (NSC), or more specifically, of a NSC subcommittee. This unit changed names over time, but it retained the same responsibilities – approval, monitoring and review. Unless a president chose to become involved personally—such as Kennedy with Cuba, or Nixon with Chile—the interagency committee served as the ultimate authority for operations approval and review. Effectively this NSC unit was the high command of the secret war. The documents in this electronic briefing book illustrate the covert high command in action.

President John F. Kennedy inherited an existing apparatus for making covert operations decisions. Dwight D. Eisenhower and Harry S. Truman had created it as the same type of NSC subcommittee. Named after an Eisenhower directive, NSC 5412/2, the unit was known as the 5412 Group or, to be even more vague, the “Special Group.” Many of its working sessions, during the early Kennedy administration, were conducted over Tuesday luncheons. Later sessions were called as necessary. The unit essentially constituted a deputy secretaries committee covering covert operations and strategic reconnaissance. The Special Group had the authority to approve, reject, and review all covert activities. President Kennedy also appointed an additional expert, with his own staff, the “special military adviser,” who would be General Maxwell D. Taylor. President Kennedy additionally made Taylor the chairman of the Special Group (5412).

Small staffs served the various Special Groups. From 1961 through about 1965 the executive assistant was an officer detailed by the CIA who worked officially for the director of central intelligence (DCI). Afterwards the assistant’s job was usually extra duty for the NSC staffer who held the intelligence portfolio. This person was typically an officer detailed from the CIA also, but in this case they were responsible to the national security

adviser, not the DCI. For the Special Group (Augmented) the staff assistant was an Army colonel. For the Special Group (CI) the staff assistant was the NSC staffer responsible for global security programs. During the entire time of the CI group's existence (1962-1965) this person, though formerly of the CIA, functioned as a defense intellectual.

All the chief executives maintained a White House watchdog unit authorized to review intelligence operations, including covert operations. This was the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB). The Special Group did not *report* to PFIAB, rather the CIA supplied the board with periodic updates, and PFIAB could then decide to look into any activities it cared to.

At the highest level the president's national security adviser, at the time McGeorge Bundy, worked closely with the DCI to track intelligence activities from a NSC perspective. According to the State Department representative, "Mac Bundy consulted with the President to the degree he considered desirable, but he did not necessarily tell us whether he had, or if he had, what the President's views had been."^[1] The national security advisor was a member of the Special Group, and after Maxwell's Taylor's October 1962 departure (to become chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), its chairman. Security advisers during this period include Bundy (presidents Kennedy and Johnson), Walt Rostow (Johnson), and Henry Kissinger (Nixon).

Covert operations proposals originated variously. What became the CIA operation at the Bay of Pigs started with the president of the United States himself. Ambassadors, station chiefs, the DCI, the deputy director for plans (DDP), the DDP area divisions, the State or Defense Departments could all suggest covert operations. Proposals from outside the agency often surfaced initially at the Special Group.

Proposals that began within the CIA went through an internal approval process. Usually this originated in the DDP. When more specific criteria for approval were formulated in the early 1960s, proposals budgeted under a certain dollar amount could be approved directly within the agency, while larger ones went to the interagency group. The DDP presented pros and cons to the director's office, and the DCI was responsible for dealings with the Special Group and its brethren. The DCI himself was a member of the Special Group. He or his deputy attended its meetings.

At the State Department, many covert operations proposals were staffed by its Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR). During this period the director had one element focused on actual analysis, plus a politico-military unit under him. The latter unit drafted INR comments on covert operations proposals. These eventually circulated to the secretary of state for review, and then went to the interagency NSC committee. To a degree it became customary for the secretary of state to propose covert operations and write the project papers which went to the Special Group. The deputy secretary of state, not the secretary or the INR director, was State's representative on the Special Group. From April 1961, and into the Nixon years, this person was Ulysses Alexis Johnson (referred to below as "Alex"). Aside from consulting INR, Johnson would usually speak to the assistant

secretary of state responsible for the region where an operation was proposed. Johnson adverts that he managed good relations with many of his counterparts from other agencies, but faced proposals that held risks he considered excessive, and so he acquired the nickname “Dr. No.” [\[2\]](#)

The deputy secretary of defense would be the Pentagon’s representative on the Special Group. As at State, the staff work associated with covert operations was the responsibility of a different part of the bureaucracy. Until the summer of 1961 this was the Office of Special Operations (OSO), a holdover from earlier years. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara reorganized his office that fall, and replaced OSO with a new Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA).

President Kennedy inherited certain operations, already ongoing, that had been approved by the Special Group during Eisenhower’s time. Among these were efforts in the Dominican Republic, Tibet, the Congo, and against Castro’s Cuba. The Dominican Republic played itself out over the year 1961, when dictator Rafael Trujillo was assassinated. Tibet was in stasis, with aircraft resupply of partisan fighters prohibited since the 1960 U-2 shutdown, and little practical capacity to supply the rebellion on the ground over the Himalayas. The Congo remained an ongoing headache. But the Cuba operation resulted in major disaster at the Bay of Pigs within a few months of Kennedy’s entering office, and then preoccupied him throughout his presidency. When covert operations carried very high risks, or were judged to be of moderate risk but the high command was divided over whether to approve them, that was when a president became involved. He would meet and discuss the proposal with Special Group members. Thus President Kennedy met with 5412 members on Cuba several times (for example Documents 6 and 8), as did President Johnson (Document 12).

In early 1962, the president added the Special Group (Counterinsurgency) to focus on military and police aid projects, anti-guerrilla operations, and other security programs. It differed from the 5412 group by including officials from the Agency for International Development, the United States Information Agency, and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. The president considered the Special Group (CI) so important that it had its initial meeting the same day JFK issued the National Security Action Memorandum that established it. When General Taylor moved on to the Joint Chiefs, several members wished to transfer this committee to the State Department, but instead it remained within NSC, where Bobby Kennedy wanted to serve as chairman. Instead, Alex Johnson succeeded to the chairmanship and Michael Forrestal followed Max Taylor as the White House representative. Later Averell Harriman held sway.

One problem with all of the special groups within their NSC context is what, precisely, did “high command” mean? Was the Special Group a *command authority*, giving orders that the CIA, Pentagon, and State Department were required to implement? Or was it an interagency committee making recommendations to members’ home departments, coordinating rather than directing? The confusion persisted, in considerable part due to the convention of plausible deniability. Presidents could not clarify the matter because

they were not supposed to be seen to be meddling in covert operations. Alex Johnson, the State Department representative, although writing only of the Special Group (CI), makes remarks that could apply as easily to the other units:

Bobby Kennedy, the Defense Department, and to some extent the President never quite brought themselves to accept the fact that we were coordinating the departments instead of directing them. I always took the view that our decisions could have no meaning except insofar as we implemented them through our departments, which alone had the authority to allocate money and people to make them work. I do not believe the President always understood this. He typically wanted fast results and was inclined to feel that if he put somebody in charge of something, this person would be able to give directions that the departments would have to carry out.[\[3\]](#)

John Kennedy's track record on Cuba makes Alex Johnson's point. In late 1961 President Kennedy added a variant committee he called the Special Group (Augmented), which concerned itself entirely with operations against Cuba. He apparently considered the regular 5412 unit too cautious or too slow. The Special Group (Augmented) actually referred to the 5412 unit, but with the addition of Bobby Kennedy. The thought must have been that Bobby would keep the balls in the air. Of this endeavor the State Department representative writes, "Recognizing that internal circumstances in Cuba were not right for a quick overthrow, however, the Special Group (Augmented) should first concentrate on acquiring hard data about possible targets," a clear reference to Edward Lansdale's Operation *Mongoose* plan of February 20, 1962 (Document 5). Johnson also reports the high command never discussed assassinating Castro. Johnson quotes President Kennedy, as early as March 1962, as doubtful a revolt in Cuba would happen. "I never had moral qualms about Mongoose," Alex Johnson says for himself, "But I never thought much of the operation either." Bobby Kennedy was out front. Alex Johnson quotes him too: "We are in a combat situation [with Castro] and we have complete command. There is no excuse for failure. There is no reason that the richest, most powerful nation in the world can't do this." President Kennedy encouraged Lansdale but often drew back when it became a matter of approving specific covert operations that had high noise levels.[\[4\]](#)

The high command could falter too. Later in 1962 JM/WAVE, the CIA's Miami Station, came up with the idea of contaminating a cargo of Cuban sugar bound for Eastern Europe. The *Mongoose* plans had discussed sabotage in the abstract, but the prospect of sickening innocent consumers, especially in communist satellite countries which it was also a covert operations goal to influence, was too much. But as Alex Johnson recounts, "The ship had sailed by the time the Special Group (Augmented) got wind of this."[\[5\]](#)

By late 1962 that operation ran up against the Cuba Missile Crisis. JFK then went even higher, to his NSC Standing Group. Each time he sought the authoritative official. Alex Johnson caps his point this way: "Creating jobs outside the chain of command [and] expecting them to stand Washington on its head ignored the realities of power in the

government, and the Congress, which hold the departments and their secretaries responsible for the way funds and personnel were allocated.”[\[6\]](#)

That said, this collection of officials, which included the CIA director and the deputy secretary of defense, *could* accomplish a very great deal within their departments. The Special Groups brought together key officials who *had* formal authority, and records in this EBB show them going into great detail on covert operations plans and activities. To the extent that a high command of the secret war existed, this was it.

These arrangements remained standard throughout the 1961 to 1974 period, despite repeated name changes for the Special Group. Successor President Johnson revised the structure in mid-1964, creating the 303 Committee, named after a presidential order. In 1965 Johnson abolished the Special Group (Counterinsurgency), but the 303 Committee continued through the first year of the Nixon administration, when its designation changed to the 40 Committee, again drawn from the number of a national security decision memorandum.

The work of the Special Group and nature of proposals brought to it changed over time. Over much of the period covered by this posting, covert operations were big business. Between January 1961 and the fall of 1962 the Special Group approved 550 covert operations. Figures given to the congressional investigating committees in 1975—163 projects from January 1961-November 1963—evidently exclude such bread-and-butter approvals as reconnaissance missions, follow-on decisions on existing projects, or covert proposals beneath a particular threshold.[\[7\]](#)

Activity peaked in 1964 and remained strong through the 1967 scandal over secret CIA funding of the National Student Association. Not all projects received the Special Group imprimatur. In the first five months of 1964 the Special Group approved 23 of 35 project proposals.[\[8\]](#) The center of gravity for covert action also changed over time. The Kennedy administration had a marked focus on Latin America, especially Cuba. This focus continued but proposals spread out regionally.

Between January 1967 and June 1968 the 303 Committee considered 23 projects for Africa, 33 for Latin America, 15 for Europe, 14 for Asia and 2 for the Middle East. The reason for the scarcity of proposals for the Middle East was given as a poor operational environment in the wake of the Six Day war.[\[9\]](#)

One thorny problem that persisted throughout the period was review of existing operational activity. President Kennedy held at least one meeting intended for this purpose in 1961. Other than a mention from time to time at Special Group, there is little indication of subsequent specific reviews. Several CIA internal or consultant studies over the 1960s considered either the universe of covert operations or approval of procedures for projects. In 1969, when Henry Kissinger chaired the 303 Committee, he attempted to enforce a regimen under which covert operations that had not undergone review were automatically cancelled. But Kissinger did not meet with the interagency body often enough for that to be practical. Where Special Group had met weekly, Kissinger’s 303

Committee held only 18 meetings through 1969, 19 in 1970, and 17 in 1971. For three years after that the 40 Committee held no more than one session annually.^[10] The standard became project approval by telephone, which made reviews pretty much impossible. Treatment of covert operations projects also varied. For example, the 303, then 40 Committees considered and authorized several stages of the *Glomar Explorer* project, and new measures for the secret war in Laos, but the high command would be kept in the dark about “Track II” of Nixon’s plan to overthrow Salvador Allende of Chile.

Future electronic briefing books will address several specific covert operations of this era, further illustrating the breadth and depth of the CIA Set III document collection.



Director of Central Intelligence Allen W. Dulles, 1953-1961 (Wikipedia)



John A. McCone, CIA director from 1961-1965 (Wikipedia)



***Richard Helms was the first career intelligence officer to lead the agency, from 1966-1973
(Wikipedia)***



***William E. Colby headed the CIA during its most turbulent years, from 1973-1976
(Wikipedia)***



President John F. Kennedy, 1961-1963 (Wikipedia)



President Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1969 (Wikipedia)



President Richard M. Nixon, 1969-1974 (Wikipedia)



Fidel Castro and Che Guevara were frequent targets of the CIA (Pinterest)



Jean-Bédél Bokassa ruled the Central African Republic as president from 1966-1976, then the renamed Central African Empire as Emperor Bokassa I from 1976-1979 (Wikipedia)

THE DOCUMENTS



[Document 1](#)

[White House, Memorandum for the Record, "Meeting Minutes of Special Group Meeting," June 8, 1961](#)

1961-06-08

Source: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, John F. Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 319, Folder, "Special Group Meetings 6/8/1961-11/2/1962."

After discussing a covert operation in the Congo and political action programs against allies, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy cautioned that "higher authority wished to review them" before approval. Allen Dulles, the director of the CIA, however, argued in favor of less oversight by those up the chain of command, explaining that "the pertinent NSC paper authorized programs such as that under discussion." He emphasized that CIA would only undertake this type of activity if fully supported by the president and Department of State. But Mr. Dulles also said that he felt "the Special Group should have some latitude to make decisions on these matters within the general policy which might be laid down by higher authority without referral of each specific case for approval."



[Document 02](#)

[Memorandum from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Special Assistant to the President, to President John F. Kennedy, "CIA Reorganization," June 30, 1961.](#)

1961-06-30

Source: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, John F. Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Departments and Agencies, Box 271, Folder, "CIA 5/1961 - 8/1961."

In this sobering memo to the president in the wake of the Bay of Pigs, Schlesinger warns that "an agency dedicated to clandestine activity can afford damn few visible errors," and the CIA "has about used up its quota. Its margin for future error is practically non-existent. One more CIA debacle will shake faith considerably in US policy, at home as well as abroad." Schlesinger then explained that the troubles at CIA can be traced "to the autonomy with which the agency has been permitted to operate; and that this autonomy is due to three main causes: (1) an inadequate doctrine of clandestine operations; (2) an inadequate conception of the relationship between operations and policy; (3) an inadequate conception of the relationship between operations and intelligence."

In critiquing the lack of a "doctrine governing our conduct of clandestine operations," Schlesinger concluded that "secret activities are permissible so long as they do not corrupt the principles and practices of our society, and that they cease to be permissible when their effect is to corrupt these principles and practices." Concerning the policy-operations nexus, Schlesinger warns that "CIA operations have not been held effectively subordinate to U.S. foreign policy." Finally, Schlesinger also criticizes the CIA's lack of professionalism in leaking the "triumphs" of its operations, including the 1953 coup in Iran and the 1954 coup in Guatemala, "a gross and repeated CIA failing has been its

occasional readiness to succumb to the temptation of favorable publicity.” Schlesinger also makes some recommendations including “a rational reorganization of intelligence” where operations would have to be reviewed and cleared by the State Department and State led inter-agency groups.



[Document 03](#)

[Memorandum from Brigadier General Richard G. Stilwell for the Secretary of the Army, “Army Activities in Underdeveloped Areas Short of Declared War,” October 13, 1961](#)

1961-10-13

Source: United States Army, Military History Institute, 094.319.1, Counterinsurgency Operations Course & Related Materials, 10.13.61FW 10-6-61.

This 75-page report on the Army’s performance in “Sublimated War” or what its author, Brigadier General Richard G. Stilwell explains as, “the unconventional, unorthodox, paramilitary, military assistance by another name, or whatever,” is an archetype of the kinds of efforts in that age to erect a formal theoretical structure around unconventional warfare and covert operations. Stilwell argues that the “Army’s potential capability far exceeded currently programmed or planned utilization,” and makes several suggestions as to “how the Army’s contribution might be materially increased.” The goal of the Army should be to find “imaginative” ways to improve “the capability of local armed forces, both allied and neutral, to insure internal defense and deter external aggression.”

On the one hand, the Army could help train allied forces in repression, “to heighten the effectiveness of indigenous military and paramilitary forces in insuring against the development of dissident factions; or in dealing with armed insurgency, should it erupt. (Programs undertaken in Laos and proposed in South Vietnam are examples.)” On the other hand, the Army could train guerrillas for sabotage operations, “to accelerate the development of indigenous military and paramilitary capabilities, to include support mechanisms, for conducting subversion or guerrilla activities, in contiguous Communist territory. (We have already developed such units in Taiwan and South Korea.). However, Stilwell cautions that “Only individuals of exceptional skill, motivation and leadership ability can properly perform the training, guidance and related tasks involved - in alien environment and remote from supervision.” Luckily, Stilwell concludes, plenty of such people are available.



[Document 04](#)

[Memorandum from Lawrence R. Houston, CIA General Counsel, to Director of Central Intelligence, John McCone, “Legal Basis for Cold-War Activities,” January 15, 1962.](#)

1962-01-15

Source: Center for National Security Studies FOIA

After discussing the legality of covert action with Assistant Attorney General and head of the Department of Justice Office of Legal Counsel, Nicolas deB. Katzenbach, CIA General Counsel Lawrence Houston prepares this memorandum “for information,” where he notes that while “The President, with his responsibility for the conduct of foreign relations, as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and with powers inherent in the Presidency, has authority to take such executive actions as he deems appropriate to protect the national interest which are not barred by the Constitution or other valid law of the land.” Houston also relies on the fact that Congress has appropriated money it knew was intended for covert operations. In other words, the CIA relies on the president’s Article 2 powers under the Constitution plus the appropriation argument, to justify the use of force.

But Houston also acknowledges that “there is no statutory authorization to any agency for the conduct of such activities.” Furthermore, Houston explains that section 102(d)(5) of the 1947 National Security Act did not approve covert action as, “It would be stretching that section too far to include a Guatemala or a Cuba...” Nonetheless, Houston recommends that “additional statutory authority is unnecessary and, in view of the clandestine nature of the activities, undesirable.” The Vietnam era would call into question Article 2 war powers, and specifically deflate the acceptance-by-appropriation argument.



[Document 05](#)

[Memorandum from Brigadier General Edward Lansdale to the President, Attorney General, Special Group et. al. “The Cuba Project,” February 20, 1962.](#)

1962-02-20

Source: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, John F. Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 319, Folder, “Special Group (Augmented), 1/1962 – 6/1962.”

This is a detailed paper outlining the specific plan of action against Cuba that the Special Group (5412) had requested. The goal of the plan, “in keeping with the spirit” of a presidential memorandum, states: “the United States will help the people of Cuba overthrow the Communist regime from within Cuba and institute a new government with which the United States can live in peace.” The paper acknowledges that “We still know too little about the real situation inside Cuba;” nonetheless, there is “an anti-regime atmosphere among the Cuban people which makes a resistance program a distinct and present possibility.” Included with this memo is a “realistic” operational plan to overthrow the Cuban government by October 1962.



[Document 06](#)

[Memorandum for the record by Brigadier General Edward Lansdale, "Meeting with the President, 16 March 1962" March 16, 1962.](#)

1962-03-16

Source: National Security Archive, released at the Bay of Pigs 40th anniversary, Havana, March 2001.

In this summary of a key meeting with President Kennedy, the "Guidelines for Operation Mongoose" were discussed. Lansdale argued that "the thesis of creating a revolution inside Cuba looked just as valid as ever," and that a successful plan required agents "trained or experienced in guerrilla warfare," and that "U.S. military participation [was needed] for support, including air-resupply and maritime actions." The president was also notified that the "military had contingency plans for U.S. intervention" including "plans for creating plausible pretexts to use force, with the pretexts either attacks on U.S. aircraft or a Cuban action in Latin America for which we would retaliate." Kennedy replied "bluntly" that "we were not discussing the use of U.S. military force." When it came to Cuban immigration into the U.S., Kennedy asked, "Wouldn't it be better to shut our doors to the people trying to get out, so that they would be forced to stay and take action against the regime?" Lansdale argued against such a policy given that "we would be foolish to remove this symbol of our sympathy and cut off the source of intelligence information and recruits. We must give the Cubans the chance and the help to free themselves." Finally, Attorney General Robert Kennedy raised Mary Hemingway, Castro's reported heavy drinking, and the "opportunities offered by the 'shrine' to Hemingway." Lansdale explained that "this was worth assessing firmly and pursuing vigorously. If there are grounds for action. CIA had some invaluable assets which might well be committed for such an effort."



[Document 07](#)

[Department of State, "What we hoped to accomplish in Phase I \[Operation Mongoose\]" July 19, 1962.](#)

1962-07-19

Source: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, John F. Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 319, Folder, "Special Group (Augmented), July 1962." This detailed document explains that the Kennedy administration hoped to "Undertake as many political, economic, psychological and other actions as feasible, designed to weaken the Castro regime and isolate it from the rest of the Hemisphere." It then outlines a series of steps that the U.S. had taken in order to isolate Cuba diplomatically, engage in

“economic warfare,” “psychological warfare,” and in working with Cuban exiles, including in “assisting in the arrangements for the training of a small group of exile military officers at advanced US military schools.”



Document 08

John A. McCone, Director Central Intelligence Agency, Memorandum for the Record, “Executive Committee Meeting – 12:30 p.m. – 29 March 1963,” with attached memorandum, “Unauthorized Cuban Raids,” March 29, 1963.

1963-03-29

Source: NARA, JFK Assassination Records, Docid: 104-10306-10016.

This memo describes President Kennedy asking the members of ExComm “what should be our policy on hit-and-run raids” by Cuban exiles. DCI McCone recommended that “On a minimum, we should act to disassociate ourselves and do all possible not to permit the continuance of unauthorized raids.” Douglas Dillon was skeptical that such raids could be stopped. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara disagreed, arguing that they could be terminated by “utilizing military resources.” The Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy, suggested “various steps that could be taken to identify the leadership of the various groups and to either prosecute them or exclude them from the country through immigration procedures.” After the group discussed reports of an “airplane that was ready to bomb Soviet ship,” Vice President Lyndon Johnson suggested “we would be criticized either from letting them go on the one hand, or stopping them on the other. He felt the military should immediately study that which should be done to stop them and all action should be taken to halt the unauthorized raids.”

In the attached memo, McCone explains that the CIA is well aware of the plans of three Cuban-exile organizations, the Front of Escambrey, Alpha 66, and Lambda 66, and that “There is no doubt that the individuals are in and out of Florida and Puerto Rico.” McCone once again reiterates that, “Obviously raids of this type will exasperbate [sic] problems with Castro and more particularly the Soviet Union and, from that standpoint, are (un)desirable.” [‘un’ is added with handwritten notes] However, McCone also outlines positive aspects of such attacks, including, “successful harassment will create very considerable annoyance, will stimulate internal dissension, will complicate Castro's problems and will have very considerable effect in discrediting Castroism in Latin America. Inability of Castro to deal with these raids might cause the Soviets to question the strength of his position and therefore reappraise their own position in Cuba. It is impossible to predict the result of such reappraisal. On the one hand it might cause them to question their presence in Cuba; on the other to reinforce it; and finally, might cause them to open up a discussion of their presence with the United States.”



Document 09

CIA, John McCone Memorandum for the Record, "Special Group (5412) Meeting, 11 April 1963," April 11, 1963.

1963-04-11

Source: NARA, JFK Assassination Records, Docid: 104-10306-10003.

In this memo, DCI McCone expresses frustration at the lack of a coherent strategy towards Cuba. At the outset, Mac Bundy declares, "The proposed infiltration-exfiltration operations, past and projected, were reviewed and approved. The proposed program of sabotage and harassment, both in general and the detailed plan," were discussed at length. The program had been developed more or less at the direction of the president. "It was not the intention of higher authority to approve and authorize specific actions." McCone describes his opposition to such a policy: "I questioned the advisability of proceeding with the program until we had crystallized the total policy designed to remove the Soviets from Cuba and also remove Castro. I said I was not clear as to how this was to be accomplished, nor did I feel that there was any agreed series of actions designed to meet this end objective. Therefore, it appeared to me that we are projecting a few of the annoying operations, none of which would permanently impair the facilities under attack nor would they seriously impair Castro's economic or military posture and, hence, serve no useful purpose."



Document 10

John McCone, Director Central Intelligence, "Memorandum on Cuban Policy," April 25, 1963.

1963-04-25

Source: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, John F. Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Country File, Box 51, Folder, "Cuba: Subjects – Intelligence Material 4/1963."

In this sobering assessment, DCI McCone concludes that, "Economic hardships and other difficulties, such as insurgency, raids, etc. within Cuba, will complicate his problems but, on balance, it seems to me Castro's situation has improved since about December and will continue to improve" although, "This trend can be slowed and possibly reversed if United States action is taken with determination, continuity and, consistency." As such, "The economic blockade must be kept up and intensified" and "The United States should break the sugar market if possible." In addition, "Low-level sabotage, such as minor crop destruction activities, interruption of transportation, etc., will be annoying. Successful major sabotage from within and without will, in my opinion, add to the problems created by the economic measures." Ultimately, though, "A combination of economic pressure

and largescale sabotage will hurt Castro seriously, but it will not bring him down.”

McCone also argues that “a program of ‘misinformation’ properly carried out would be effective.” He clarifies that, “the presence of the several thousand Soviets in Cuba does not pose a threat to this country” and that “we should not be deterred from any actions of any kind necessary to slow down Castro’s growth or to overthrow him on grounds that this would cause a Kremlin decision not to remove its troops.” Yet, McCone also had limits, arguing: “The most extreme measures which would be directed against the population are feasible, but I am against them on humane and moral grounds. They would be attributable to the United States. They would stand as a black mark on our record for all time. They would cause untold hardship to thousands, perhaps millions, of individuals who are not responsible for Castro and can do nothing about him, and they would not necessarily answer the ‘Castro-Communist problem’. It seems to me that if the problem is so serious that we must resort to these measures, then we should face up to a direct confrontation, a blockade and an invasion.” He concludes that “the establishment of a military dictatorship friendly to the United States and to the Western Hemisphere nations, unfriendly to the Soviets and it would be non-Communist,” while desirable and “the only course open to bring Castro-Communism down” was unlikely.



[Document 11](#)

[White House, National Security Council, Memorandum for the File, “Board Panel on Covert Action Operations,” September 10, 1963.](#)

1963-09-10

Source: NARA, JFK Assassination Records, Records of the President’s Intelligence Advisory Board, Box 1, Folder, “203-10001-10012.”

This memo summarizes the briefing given by Richard Helms, Deputy Director for Plans, to the President’s Intelligence Advisory Board. On Cuba, Helms explains that the U.S. has shifted its strategy from “external raids” to “internal sabotage actions.” The covert action program consisted of six elements: “(1) covert collection of intelligence, (2) propaganda action to stimulate ‘low-key sabotage’, (3) stimulate disaffection among the Cuban military, (4) an economic denial program aimed at precluding acquisition of spare parts for industrial machinery, and other products needed by Cuba, (5) a sabotage program of a general nature, and (6) support for anti-Castro autonomous groups, giving them the money and the means to act, but under an arrangement which insures against attribution to the United States, and which precludes operations from U.S. or British soil. (The CIA philosophy is to back only the potentially powerful and effective anti-Castro groups, and the military is felt to be the best bet.)” The Agency carried out “about 10 ‘black’ sabotage operations a month.” Economic sabotage was deemed successful given that “Cubans are not starving but they do not eat comfortably even in the larger cities.” The objective of these operations was a military coup: “the objective is to give encouragement to

dissident Cuban elements such as military officers who see no professional future under Castro who is unloading military elements which aided him in his initial seizure of the government.”



Document 12

CIA, Memorandum for the Record, “Meeting with the President on Cuba at 1100 on 19 December 1963,” December 19, 1963.

1963-12-19

Source: Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, John McCone Papers, Box 1, Folder, “Meetings with President 11/23/1963 - 12/27/1963.”

This memo explains that President Johnson, “after full discussion, postponed any sizable operations” due to diplomatic concerns. However, Bundy explained that “his analysis of the meeting was that the President would continue to approve smaller [redacted] operations even though they would be relatively unrewarding if they would assist in keeping up the morale [redacted] and otherwise help in keeping the ball rolling.” McCone then suggested that the broad objective needed to be addressed, “a question of whether we wished to implement the policy as outlined” in a June paper that laid out a basic strategy for continuing covert operations against Cuba, or “abandon the basic objective of bringing about the liquidation of the Castro Communist entourage and the elimination of Communist presence in Cuba and thus rely on future events of an undisclosed nature which might accomplish this objective.” McCone warned that “the actions favorably looked upon... all would have some effect but definitely would not accomplish the stated objectives.”



Document 13

Marshall S. Carter, Deputy Director Central Intelligence, Memorandum for the Record, “Special Group (5412) Meeting at 1600 on 13 February,” February 14, 1964.

1964-02-14

Source: NARA, JFK Assassination Records, Docid: 104-10310-10020.

The Special Group discussed a February 10 paper on “Clandestine and Covert Activities Against Cuba.” While most group members were in favor of the proposal, McCone, “stated that he was disturbed over the trend of events in Cuba and that this particular paper really does not go far enough.” Thomas C. Mann agreed, noting that “our entire program as regards Cuba was ineffective insofar as it could result in any overthrow of Castro.” Bundy concluded the discussion on Cuba by stating “in any event we must have a top-level Cabinet Meeting with the President to discuss this whole matter.”



[Document 14](#)

[President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, "Minutes of Board Meeting of August 6 and 7, 1964," August 8, 1964.](#)

1964-08-08

Source: NARA, JFK Assassination Records, docid 206-10001-1004.

In this alarming memo, Dr. Jerome Wiesner, after having conducted an on-the-scene examination of the U.S. embassy in Moscow where several microphones had been found, finds that "There is no convincing basis for concluding that additional listening systems do not exist in the building." Wiesner explained that "The physical security of the building seemed a bit less than adequate. For example, it was possible for us to go in and out of the room housing the telephone switch-board with no one but the telephone operator—who I believe was a Russian girl—seeing us. I understand that at night no one is in the room." As far as the soundproof rooms, the situation was less dire as, "the soundproof rooms and the special room containing the teletype equipment appear to be secure, though the former are not electrically shielded. The lack of shielding is probably not serious because the rooms are in the interior of the building and under guard at all times so that the use of microphones or of electromagnetic listening devices in them would be extremely difficult." Wiesner recommended an increase in staff: "A very complete physical examination must be made of any room that is to be used for confidential conversations," and other security reinforcements.



[Document 15](#)

[White House, National Security Council, Peter Jessup memorandum for Bill Moyers and Walt Rostow, "303 Committee Meeting," with attached excerpts from prior 303 Committee meetings, July 26, 1966.](#)

1966-07-26

Source: Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, National Security Files, Intelligence Files, Box 2, Folder, "CIA Budgets and 303 Committee."

This memo shows President Johnson's reluctance to engage in covert operations, in this case conveying political action money to party figures of a close American ally. An excerpt from a June 25, 1965, 303 Committee meeting describes the operation as a "necessary evil," and McGeorge Bundy deplores the "chronic failure of the [redacted] political parties to utilize their own bootstraps." Bundy called U.S. black funds a "continuing subsidy." On August 12, after being briefed on the proposal, President Johnson "displayed a marked lack of sympathy for an 'annual dues' concept of covert financial assistance to such a

prosperous nation,” but approved the project nonetheless. The following year, 303 Committee members were reminded of Johnson’s misgivings, noting a “distinct coolness on the part of the President to ‘uninterrupted aid to a prosperous nation.’” Speculating that the President would be “cooler to an outlay of money” for the present situation, NSC staffer Peter Jessup defended that course, given that “there are no fresh reasons underlining the necessity for this support and the arguments against have increased.”



[Document 16](#)

[Memorandum for the 303 Committee, “Reaffirmation of Existing Policy on Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty,” September 8, 1966.](#)

1966-09-08

Source: Cold War International History Project: A. Ross Johnson Donation

This document provides background on the development, objectives, challenges, and plans for modernization pertaining to Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty in the late 1960s. It recommends that the 303 Committee approve the findings and CIA calls for modernization.



[Document 17](#)

[White House, Walt W. Rostow, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, note to President Johnson on 303 Committee meetings regarding CIA support for youth and student groups \(with 303 Committee meeting minutes attached\), February 18, 1967.](#)

1967-02-18

Source: Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, National Security Files, Intelligence Files, Box 2, Folder, “303 Committee.”

In this note to President Johnson, Rostow attaches “the records in our minutes of meetings of the 303 Committee (and its predecessor group, 5412 Group) which refer to CIA connection with support for youth and student groups. The first such reference is 25 February 1959; the last is 3 December 1964.” Rostow felt the need to add some context to the approval process of covert actions, noting, “You should know that the basic work of the 303 Committee is to examine new programs; although, in the period I have been here, I have asked for reexamination of certain programs when current issues arose.” Attached to the note is a “Chronology of Briefings of 303 Committee on Youth and Student Activities,” which documents at least eight cases where members discussed various aspects of these projects.



Document 18

Department of State, U. Alexis Johnson, Memorandum for 40 Committee, "Request for Funds for President [redacted] to Pass to President Bokassa of the Central African Republic in Forgery Case," July 10, 1972.

1972-07-10

Source: Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Gerald R. Ford Papers, Presidential Handwriting File, Box 31, Folder, "Intelligence (8)."

This memo approves the payment of \$20,000 (\$120,000 in 2019) to President [redacted] so he can provide a "gift" to President Bokassa of the Central African Republic in helping avert a diplomatic "embarrassment" to the U.S. After having received a series of "forged" documents "attempting to show that the CIA is actively working to overthrow regimes in power," President Bokassa threatened to break off diplomatic relations with the U.S. President [redacted] intervened on behalf of the U.S. and after getting Bokassa to change his mind, he requested money to provide Bokassa with a gift. The State Department explained that "the problem has been discussed informally with the CIA, which is the Agency primarily concerned with the wave of forged documents circulating in Africa in recent months. It agrees that [redacted] action has had the desirable impact of avoiding embarrassment to USG, and has given it a new opportunity to trace the origin of those documents. They are therefore in agreement that we should make the requested payment."

Notes

[1] U. Alexis Johnson with Jef Olivarius McAllister, *The Right Hand of Power: The Memoirs of an American Diplomat*. Englewood Cliffs (NJ): Prentice-Hall, 1984, p. 349.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Johnson with McAllister, *The Right Hand of Power*, p. 330.

[4] Johnson, *The Right Hand of Power*, p. 343, Bobby Kennedy quoted 344.

[5] Ibid., p. 345.

[6] Ibid, p. 330.

[7] Prados, *Safe for Democracy*, p. 292.

[8] Ibid.

[9] National Security Council Memo, Peter Jessup-Maxwell Taylor, June 4, 1968 (declassified Sept 23, 2003). LBJL: NSF: Intel File, box 2, f: "303 Committee."

[10] NSC Tabulation, "OAG Meetings," no date. Jimmy Carter Library: Carter Papers: Brzezinski Materials: Rick Inderfurth Files, b. 1, f: "Inderfurth Chronological, 11/22/76-12/31/76." In 1975 the 40 Committee would be replaced by the Operations Advisory Group, yet another new name for 5412 Special Group.

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