In the first months of his term, Kennedy's focus on Laos, Vietnam, and the Congo paled alongside that on Cuba. Look journalist Laura Berquist Knebel observed that, whenever she saw Kennedy, he "nearly always" wanted to discuss Cuba, "his 'albatross,' as he used to call it." During the 1960 campaign, he had already learned how frustrating Cuba could be as an issue. In 1958–59, he had been sympathetic to Castro's revolution against the corrupt and repressive Batista regime. By 1960, however, he shared the growing perception in the United States that Castro, who may have begun as a "utopian socialist," had abandoned his romantic idealism for an alliance with Cuban communists who were likely to help solidify his hold on power. The new regime in Havana seemed hell-bent on making the U.S. into a whipping boy and using widespread anti-American sentiment in Cuba to tie itself to Moscow and Peking. After facing attacks by liberals and Nixon during the presidential campaign for favoring an invasion by Cuban exiles, Kennedy had accepted Acheson's advice and conspicuously avoided further comments on Cuba.

In early January 1961, Kennedy tried to stay above the battle, refusing to comment "either way" on Eisenhower's decision to break relations with Cuba. He did not want to rule out the possibility of a "rapprochement" with Castro. He asked John Sharon, a Stevenson adviser on foreign policy, what he thought of the idea. He also questioned him about the Eisenhower economic sanctions: Were they working? Would the United States gain any advantage by ending them? A week before he took office, Kennedy had received a report Adlai Stevenson passed along from Chicago union leader Sidney Lens, who had just returned from Cuba. It confirmed the loss of freedoms under Castro but emphasized that the country largely supported him and that reporting by American journalists was unreliable: They were "culling the negative and not reporting the positive." In addition, Lens said that the U.S. embargo was not effective because other countries were filling the vacuum. Lens also warned that Castro spies had infiltrated the anti-Castro groups in America and were informing Castro about "their plans and conspiracies." At the same time, Allen Dulles briefed the president-elect on a CIA plan to use Cuban exiles being trained in Guatemala to infiltrate Cuba and topple Castro. Without endorsing anything, Kennedy instructed Dulles to go ahead with the planning.

Two days after he became president, the CIA had begun urging Kennedy to move against Cuba. At a January 22 meeting of Rusk,

McNamara, Bobby Kennedy, Lemnitzer, Dulles, and other national security and foreign policy experts, Dulles emphasized that the U.S. had only two months "before something would have to be done about" the Cubans being trained in Guatemala. The urgency rested partly on the belief that Castro had plans to promote communism in Latin America, and that he "already had power among the people in the Caribbean countries and elsewhere, particularly in Venezuela and Colombia." Because the CIA planners were now considering direct U.S. intervention, Rusk "commented on the enormous implications of putting U.S. forces ashore in Cuba and said we should consider everything short of this, including rough stuff." He feared "we might be confronted by serious uprisings all over Latin America if U.S. forces were to go in." He also worried that such a move might trigger "Soviet and Chinesecommunist moves in other parts of the world." The meeting ended with admonitions to consider the so-called 'shelf-life' of the Cuban unit in Guatemala... [and] the question of how overtly the United States was prepared to show its hand."

During the last week in January, Kennedy held two White House meetings on Cuba in which Lemnitzer and CIA planners emphasized that time was working against the United States. Castro was tightening his hold on the island and seemed likely to make Cuba a permanent member of the communist bloc, "with disastrous consequences to the security of the Western Hemisphere." They proposed overthrowing Castro's government by secretly supporting an invasion and establishing a provisional government, which the United States and the Organization of American States (OAS) could support. In response, Kennedy authorized continuing covert CIA operations, a revised CIA invasion plan, a prompt diplomatic initiative to isolate Castro, and a strenuous effort to keep these discussions secret. He also tried to ensure that no decision would be taken without his authority. "Have we determined what we are going to do about Cuba?" he asked McGeorge Bundy on February 6. "If there is a difference of opinion between the agencies I think they should be brought to my attention."

Differences among his advisers about the results of an invasion that give Kennedy much assurance. Bundy told him on February 4 that Defense and the CIA were much more optimistic than State about the outcome of an invasion. The military foresaw an invasion "knocking off "a full-fledged civil war in which we could then back anti-Castro forces openly." And should there be no immediate
uprising, the invaders could take refuge in the surrounding mountains and work toward the day when a critical mass of Cubans joined their cause. By contrast, State anticipated "very grave" political consequences in the United Nations and Latin America. Troubled by State's predictions, Kennedy pressed advisers later that day "for alternatives to a full-fledged 'invasion,' supported by U.S. planes, ships and supplies."

Kennedy now faced two unhappy choices. If he decided against an invasion, he would have to disarm the Cubans in Guatemala and risk public attacks from them for failing to implement Eisenhower's plans to combat communism in the hemisphere. The CIA offered Kennedy no alternative: They "doubted that other really satisfactory uses of the troops in Guatemala could be found." As O'Donnell later put it, a decision to scrap the invasion would then make Kennedy look like an "appeaser of Castro. Eisenhower made a decision to overthrow Castro and you dropped it." Kennedy would have been faced with "a major political blowup."

But an invasion might also produce an international disaster. "However well disguised any action might be," Schlesinger told Kennedy, "it will be ascribed to the United States. The result would be a wave of massive protest, agitation and sabotage throughout Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa (not to speak of Canada and of certain quarters in the United States). Worst of all, this would be your first dramatic foreign policy initiative. At one stroke, it would dissipate all the extraordinary good will which has been rising toward the new Administration through the world. It would fix a malevolent image of the new Administration in the minds of millions."

Kennedy shared Schlesinger's concern. He remembered his own rhetoric about liberty, justice, and self-determination, and understood that a visible U.S. role in an invasion would justifiably be seen as a betrayal of the progressive principles to which he was supposedly committed. But he was also attracted to the idea of toppling a Castro government that seemed to have little regard for the democratic freedoms promised by the Cuban revolution or for the autonomy of other Latin countries, which Castro hoped to destabilize and bring into the communist orbit. During the February 8 meeting, Kennedy asked CIA planners if the Cuban brigade could "be landed gradually and quietly and make its first major military efforts from the mountains — then taking shape as a Cuban force within Cuba, not as an invasion force sent by the Yankees."

The CIA and the military gave him assurances that the Cuban exiles could succeed without the participation of U.S. forces. On March 10, the Joint Chiefs told McNamara that "the small invasion force" of some twelve to fifteen hundred men "could be expected to achieve initial success. Ultimate success will depend on the extent to which the initial assault serves as a catalyst for further action on the part of anti-Castro elements throughout Cuba." The Chiefs also predicted that the invading brigade "will have a good chance of sustaining itself indefinitely."

In turn, the CIA endorsed and went beyond the Chiefs' recommendations. At a meeting with JFK on the eleventh, Dulles and Richard Bissell, the agency's deputy director of plans, predicted that Castro would not fall without outside intervention and that within a matter of months his military power would reduce the likelihood of a successful invasion. "The Cuban paramilitary force if effectively used [in the next month] has a good chance of overthrowing Castro, or of causing a damaging civil war, without the necessity for the United States to commit itself to overt action against Cuba."

Kennedy declared himself "willing to take the chance of going ahead; [but] ... he could not endorse a plan that put us in so openly, in view of the world situation. He directed the development of a plan where US assistance would be less obvious."

The CIA now assured the president that an invasion at Cuba's Bay of Pigs in the Zapata region some hundred miles west of Trinidad, the original site for the attack, would look less like a "small-scale World War II amphibious assault" and more like "an infiltration of guerrillas in support of an internal revolution." Although Dulles and Bissell warned that communist accusations of U.S. involvement were inevitable, they thought it preferable to the "certain risks" of demobilizing the Cuban exiles and returning them to the United States, where they seemed bound to launch ugly political attacks on the administration for losing its nerve.

Schlesinger urged Kennedy not to let the threat of political attacks push him into a questionable military operation. He saw "a slight danger of our being rushed into something because CIA has on its hands a band of people it doesn't quite know what to do with." Allen Dulles worried that if the CIA scotched the invasion and transferred the exiles from Guatemala to the United States, they would wander "around the country telling everyone what they have been doing." Obviously," Schlesinger concluded, "this is a genuine problem, but it can't be permitted to govern US policy."
The CIA, Bundy told the president on March 15, "has done a remarkable job of reframing the landing plan so as to make it unspectacular and quiet, and plausibly Cuban in its essentials. . . . I have been a skeptic about Bissell's operation, but now I think we are on the edge of a good answer."

Kennedy was still not so sure. At a meeting that day, he seemed to accept the essentials of the new plan but objected to a dawn landing, suggesting instead that "in order to make this appear as an inside guerrilla-type operation, the ships should be clear of the area by dawn." Though the CIA returned the next day with the requested changes, which Kennedy approved, he "reserved the right to call off the plan even up to 24 hours prior to the landing."

Although planning went forward for an early-April invasion, Kennedy remained hesitant, and even a little distraught about what to do. Admiral Burke deepened Kennedy's concerns on March 17, when he told him that "the plan was dependent on a general uprising in Cuba, and that the entire operation would fail without such an uprising." On March 28, Schlesinger asked JFK, "What do you think about this damned invasion?" Kennedy replied, "I think about it as little as possible," implying that it was too painful a subject with too many uncertainties for him to dwell on it. But of course it was at the center of his concerns. At yet other meetings about Cuba on March 28 and 29, Kennedy instructed the CIA to coordinate their operations with those of the landing parties.

The willingness of the Cubans, the CIA, and the U.S. military to proceed partly rested on their assumption that once the invasion began, Kennedy would have to use American forces if the attack seemed about to fail. One of the invaders remembers being told, "If you fail we will go in." The pressure for U.S. intervention was evident to Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles, who opposed the plan. On March 31, he told Rusk, "If the operation appears to be a failure in its early stages, the pressure on us to scrap our self-imposed restriction on direct American involvement will be difficult to resist." The danger, Bowles added, is that a failure would "greatly enhance Castro's prestige and strength." And Bowles saw the odds of a failure as two to one. He believed it better to scrap the invasion and live with Castro's regime. The United States could then blockade any Soviet attempt to provide Cuba with large amounts of arms and use force, with likely OAS backing, against any overt Castro aggression in Latin America.

"No one," Schlesinger said later, "expected the invasion to galvanize the unarmed and the unorganized into rising against Castro at the moment of disembarkation. But the invasion plan, as understood by the President and the Joint Chiefs, did assume that the successful occupation of an enlarged beachhead area would rather soon incite organized uprisings by armed members of the Cuban resistance." Dulles and Bissell, Schlesinger also pointed out, "reinforced this impression" by claiming "that over 2,500 persons presently belonged to resistance organizations, that 20,000 more were sympathizers, and the Brigade, once established on the island, could expect the active support of, at the very least, a quarter of the Cuban people." A CIA paper of April 12 on "The Cuban Operation" estimated that "there are 7,000 insurgents responsive to some degree of control through agents with whom communications are currently active." The paper conceded that the individual groups were "small and very inadequately armed," but after the invasion the Agency hoped to supply them with air drops and make "every effort . . . to coordinate their operations with those of the landing parties."

In the days leading up to the attack on April 17, Kennedy continued to hear dissenting voices. At the end of March, he asked Dean Acheson what he thought of the proposal to invade Cuba. Acheson did not know there was one, and when Kennedy described it to him, Acheson voiced his skepticism in the form of a question: "Are you serious?" Kennedy replied, "I don't know if I'm serious or just . . . I'm giving it serious thought." When Acheson asked how many men Castro could put on the beach to meet the nearly 1,500 invaders and Kennedy answered 25,000, Acheson declared, "It doesn't take Price-Wasserhouse to figure out that fifteen hundred aren't as good as twenty-five thousand." Schlesinger peppered JFK with memos and private words about the injury to U.S. prestige and his presidency; Rusk lodged muted protests; and Fulbright, who as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee had been briefed about the plan, spoke forcefully against U.S. hypocrisy in denouncing Soviet indifference.
to self-determination and planning an invasion of a country that was more a thorn in the flesh than a dagger in the heart.

These warnings reinforced Kennedy's own considerable doubts about so uncertain an operation. Allen Dulles countered them by saying, "Mr. President, I know you're doubtful about this. But I stood at this very desk and said to President Eisenhower about a similar operation in Guatemala, 'I believe it will work.' And I say to you now, Mr. President, that the prospects for this plan are even better than our prospects were in Guatemala." Dulles emphasized that there was small risk of failure and no risk of U.S. involvement that would sacrifice American credibility when it came to professing regard for self-determination. Dulles clearly could not foresee later critical assessments by historians complaining that CIA operations overturning a popular government in Guatemala City solidified America's reputation as an imperial power hypocritically ignoring commitments to democracy for all peoples. Or, if he did foresee this, he found it easy enough to ignore when pressing the president about Cuba.

Other subtle psychological impulses were at work in persuading Kennedy to approve the invasion plan. One element was Kennedy's conception of military action. The possibility of a nuclear war was abhorrent to him, but the idea of patriotic men prepared to sacrifice their lives for the freedom of their country was an entirely different matter. He saw no higher recommendation for someone than patriotic courage. Schlesinger remembered how much the commitment of the Cuban Brigade moved Kennedy. The invasion also had a romantic appeal for him, the quality of an adventure like that which had drawn Kennedy to command a PT boat. He and Bobby shared an affinity for Ian Fleming's James Bond novels and their urbane hero. Bissell, who did so much to sell Kennedy on the Bay of Pigs, seemed to be something of a real-life Bond himself — an Ivy League graduate, socially sophisticated, tall and handsome, "civilized, responsible," "a man of high character and remarkable intellectual gifts." His description of himself as "a man-eating shark" delighted the Kennedys.

Despite Dulles's assurances, the operation had the code name "Bumpy Road." Moreover, because Kennedy did not entirely trust Dulles's predictions, he kept emphasizing in the two weeks before the invasion that it needed to "appear as an internal uprising" and that "the United States would not become overtly engaged with Cas-

tro's armed forces." At a meeting on April 6, he insisted on "everything possible to make it appear to be a Cuban operation partly from within Cuba, but supported from without Cuba, the objective being to make it more plausible for US denial of association with the operation, although recognizing that we would be accused."

Newspaper stories about anti-Castro forces being trained by Americans made it all the harder to deny U.S. involvement. Castro "doesn't need agents over here," Kennedy said privately. "All he has to do is read our papers." At a news conference on April 12, with press stories predicting an imminent invasion, Kennedy was asked how far the United States would go "in helping an anti-Castro uprising or invasion of Cuba." He replied, "There will not be, under any conditions, an intervention in Cuba by the United States Armed Forces. This Government will do everything it can . . . to make sure that there are no Americans involved in any actions inside Cuba." Two days later, Kennedy ordered Bissell to "play down the magnitude of the invasion" and to reduce an initial air strike by Cuban pilots flying from outside Cuba from sixteen to eight planes.

On Saturday, April 15, eight B-26s flying from Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, bombed three Cuban airfields. It was the beginning of what historian Theodore Draper later called "one of those rare events in history — a perfect failure." The bombers destroyed only five of Castro's three dozen combat planes and left the invaders, traveling by boats from Nicaragua, vulnerable to air attacks before and after landing on the beaches. To give credence to a CIA cover story, the Agency arranged to have a ninth bomber with Cuban air force markings and bullet holes fly from Nicaragua to Miami, where it made an "emergency" landing and the CIA-trained pilot declared himself a defector who had flown from Cuba.

Adlai Stevenson, who was not among those the White House believed needed to know the truth, sincerely denied U.S. involvement before a U.N. General Assembly committee considering charges of United States "imperialist aggression" against Cuba. When the implausibility of the CIA cover plot quickly became evident, an outraged Stevenson complained to Rusk and Dulles on April 16, "I do not understand how we could let such an attack take place two days before debate on the Cuban issue in GA." Nor could he understand "why I could not have been warned and provided pre-prepared material with which to defend us." He saw the "gravest risk of another U-2 disaster in such uncoordinated action."
A second planned air strike in support of the invasion on the morning of April 17 became a casualty of the CIA's unraveling ruse. Until the brigade could establish a beachhead and make a plausible case for the fiction that their B-26s were taking off from and landing on the beach, Kennedy, who was keeping a low profile at his retreat in Glen Ora, Virginia, grounded the exiles' sixteen planes. After giving the order by phone to Rusk, Kennedy paced "the room in evident concern," worried now that the whole operation might prove to be a fiasco. "Those with him at Glen Ora," Schlesinger recorded, "had rarely seen him so low." When Bundy passed Kennedy's order along to Dulles's two principal deputies, they warned that "failure to make air strikes in the immediate beachhead area the first thing in the morning (D-Day) would clearly be disastrous." When informed of the president's decision, other CIA planners concluded that "it would probably mean the failure of the mission."

The failure, which became evident by Tuesday afternoon, April 18, resulted less from any decision about air attacks than from the flawed conception of the plan — illusions about an internal uprising and 1,400-plus invaders defeating Castro's much larger force. By noon of April 18, Mac Bundy told Kennedy that "the situation in Cuba is not a bit good. The Cuban armed forces are stronger, the popular response is weaker, and our tactical position is feebler than we had hoped. Tanks have done in one beachhead, and the position is precarious at the others. . . . The real question is whether to reopen the possibility of further intervention and support or to accept the high probability that our people, at best, will go into the mountains in defeat." Kennedy had no intention of sending in a U.S. rescue mission, however bad the situation might be.

Kennedy's poise in the face of the Bay of Pigs defeat began to crumble during the afternoon and evening of April 18. Admiral Burke recalled that at an hour-and-a-half White House meeting with the president and his principal advisers, "nobody knew what to do. . . . They are in a real bad hole," Burke recorded, "because they had the hell cut out of them. . . . I kept quiet because I didn't know the general score." Because Burke had been less demonstrative than Lemnitzer in his support of the invasion, Bobby Kennedy called him after the meeting to say that the president needed his advice and intended to bypass "the usual channels of responsibility in the management of the crisis." Burke had no answers, and Kennedy reconvened his advisers around midnight in the Cabinet Room. Coming from a White House reception for Congress dressed in white tie and tails, Kennedy reviewed the deteriorating situation for four hours without success. Bissell and Burke pressed for the use of carrier planes to shoot down Castro's aircraft and for a destroyer to shell Castro's tanks. But Kennedy stuck to his resolve not to intervene directly with U.S. forces. He later told Dave Powers that the Chiefs and the CIA "were sure I'd give in to them. . . . They couldn't believe that a new President like me wouldn't panic and try to save his own face. Well, they had me figured all wrong."

On Tuesday morning, Castro's air force had sunk the brigade's principal supply ship with ten days' ammunition and most of its communication equipment. By late that afternoon, Castro had pinned down the invaders with a force of twenty thousand men and Soviet tanks, while his arrest of twenty thousand potential opponents had guarded against the CIA-predicted internal uprising. As for plans of escape to the Escambray Mountains, an eighty-mile stretch of swampland between the beach and the mountains made this impossible. The outgunned and outmanned invaders faced dying on the beaches in a hopeless fight or surrender. Almost 1,200 of the 1,400-plus attackers gave up.

Kennedy at first tried to put the best possible face on the failed invasion, which was obviously a U.S.-sponsored operation. During lunch on Tuesday with Schlesinger and James Reston, he described the defeat as "an incident, not a disaster." When asked about the blow to American prestige, he responded philosophically: "What is prestige? Is it the shadow of power or the substance of power? We are going to work on the substance of power. No doubt we will be kicked in the can for the next couple of weeks, but that won't affect the main business." He felt he had made a mistake in keeping Dulles at the CIA. He did not know him and had been unable to assess his advice wisely. He saw the necessity for someone in the Agency "with whom I can be in complete and intimate contact — someone from whom I know I will be getting the exact pitch." He believed he would be better off with brother Bobby as director. "It is a hell of a way to learn things," he said, "but I have learned one thing from this business — that is, that we will have to deal with CIA."

A six-month secret review by Lyman Kirkpatrick, the Agency's inspector general, blamed the Bay of Pigs failure largely on the CIA and confirmed Kennedy's conviction that both Dulles and Bissell would have to resign. "Under a parliamentary system of government
it is I who would be leaving office," Kennedy told Dulles. "But under our system it is you who must go." Although Dulles and Bissell blamed the canceled air strikes for the defeat, Kirkpatrick concluded that this was not "the chief cause of failure"; a better-conceived plan would never have confronted Kennedy with such a decision. Kirkpatrick saw the root cause in the CIA's poor "planning, organization, staffing and management." More specifically, he blamed the false assumption that "the invasion would, like a deus ex machina, produce a shock ... and trigger an uprising," and the "multiple security leaks" that alerted Castro to the attack and allowed him to respond effectively. CIA officials "should have gone to the President and said frankly: 'Here are the facts. The operation should be halted.' ... The Agency became so wrapped up in the military operation that it failed to appraise the chances of success realistically."

Although the invasion had become a fiasco that cost more than a hundred lives and deeply embarrassed Kennedy and the United States, the president was determined not to compound his problems by publicly denying a U.S. role. But while he responded philosophically to the defeat in public, he was anything but composed in private. On April 19, Jackie told Rose that Jack "was so upset all day & had practically been in tears.... She had never seen him so depressed except once at the time of his operation." Dave Powers recalled that "within the privacy of his office, he made no effort to hide the distress and guilt he felt." At the end of the late-night meeting on April 18, he went into the Oval Office with Salinger and O'Donnell, where in the middle of a sentence he broke off the conversation and walked out into the Rose Garden. He stayed there for almost an hour, walking on the wet grass and keeping his grief to himself. The next morning, Salinger found him crying in his bedroom. At a meeting shortly after with Albert Gore, Kennedy, with messed hair and tie askew, seemed "extremely bitter" about the defeat.

Wire service journalist Henry Raymont, who had been in Cuba during the invasion, had similar recollections of Kennedy's distress. When Raymont returned to the United States after several days in a Cuban jail on charges of being a CIA agent before being expelled from the country, Kennedy invited him to the White House. Raymont was eager for the chance to chide the president for being so foolish as to think that an uprising would greet the invasion. Any high school student in Cuba or any diplomat in Havana could have told you otherwise, Raymont planned to tell Kennedy. But when he got into the Oval Office, he found the president so full of self-recrimination and so dejected at his short-sightedness that Raymont only gently reinforced what Kennedy already understood about the reasons for the failure.

Ill-timed health problems further rattled Kennedy. Immediately prior to and during the invasion on April 17 and 18, he struggled with "constant," "acute diarrhea" and a urinary tract infection. His doctors treated him with increased amounts of antispasmodics, a puree diet, and penicillin, and scheduled him for a sigmoidoscopy.

For days after the defeat, Kennedy's anguish and dejection were evident to people around him. At a cabinet meeting on April 20, Chester Bowles saw him as "quite shattered." He would talk to himself and interrupt conversations with the non sequitur "How could I have been so stupid?" He felt responsible for the deaths of the valiant Cubans on the beaches. The episode even seemed to revive memories of his brother's death in World War II. When he met at the White House to console the six-member Cuban Revolutionary Council, three of whom had lost sons in the invasion, Kennedy produced a photograph of Joe and explained, "I lost a brother and a brother-in-law in the war." Kennedy described the meeting and the Bay of Pigs episode as "the worst experience of my life." Weeks after the invasion, he told an aide one morning that he had not slept all night. "I was thinking about those poor guys in prison down in Cuba."

Kennedy was not only angry at himself for having signed on to what in retrospect seemed like such an unworkable plan but also at the CIA and the Chiefs for having misled him. When newspapers began publishing stories blaming different officials except the Joint Chiefs for the debacle, Kennedy took note of the omission and told his aides that none of the decision makers was free of blame. He named Fulbright as the only one in the clear but thought that he also would have backed the operation if he had been subjected to the same barrage of misleading information about "discontent in Cuba, morale of the free Cubans, rainy season, Russian MIGs and destroyers, impregnable beachhead, easy escape into the Escambray, [and] what else to do with these people."

To Kennedy's credit, he had no intention of publicly blaming anyone but himself. He authorized a White House statement saying, "President Kennedy has stated from the beginning that as President
he bears sole responsibility. . . . The President is strongly opposed to anyone within or without the administration attempting to shift the responsibility." He understood the impulse of some to shun their role in a failed operation. He quoted "an old saying that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan." This was his defeat: "I'm the responsible officer of the Government," he told the press.

Later that year, when *Time* began trying to use the Cuban disaster against the administration to help Republicans in 1962, Kennedy wrote publisher Henry Luce that "the testimony of the participants in an ill-fated failure should be taken with a good deal of caution." If *Time* aimed "to clear the Defense Department and the CIA from all responsibility," Kennedy declared an article it had published "a success." The same was true if *Time* intended to demonstrate "the incompetence of the men who played a part in this venture." But if the article hoped "to set the record straight," Kennedy sardonically described its success as "more limited." For the time being, he believed it a good idea to rehash the Bay of Pigs failure. "I have felt from the beginning," he told Luce, "that it would not be in the public interest for the United States to take formal responsibility for the Cuban matter other than the personal responsibility which I have earlier assumed."

He was more interested in understanding why he had allowed so unsuccessful an operation to go forward than in assessing blame. True, he had some impulse to think, "They made me do it": The false hopes pressed on him by the CIA and the Chiefs had led him astray. But "How could I have been so stupid?" was his way of asking why he had been so gullible. He puzzled over the fact that he had not asked harder questions and had allowed the so-called collective wisdom of all these experienced national security officials to persuade him to go ahead. He had assumed, he later told Schlesinger, that "the military and intelligence people have some secret skill not available to ordinary mortals." The experience taught him "never to rely on the experts." He told Ben Bradlee: "The first advice I'm going to give my successor is to watch the generals and to avoid feeling that just because they were military men their opinions on military matters were worth a damn."

More immediate concerns than understanding what had gone wrong were repairing the damage to Kennedy's prestige and deciding what to do next about Cuba. Initially, the Bay of Pigs seemed like a terrible blow to Kennedy's reputation. When journalist Henry Bran-
tore into Bowles. "That's the most meaningless, worthless thing I've ever heard," Bobby shouted. "You people are so anxious to protect your own asses that you're afraid to do anything. All you want to do is dump the whole thing on the President. We'd be better off if you just quit and left foreign policy to someone else." Richard Goodwin, who watched JFK calmly tapping his teeth with a pencil, suddenly realized that "Bobby's harsh polemic reflected the president's own concealed emotions, privately communicated in some earlier, intimate conversation. I knew, even then, there was an inner hardness, often volatile anger, beneath the outwardly amiable, thoughtful, carefully controlled demeanor of John Kennedy."

But worries about Kennedy's loss of political clout in the United States evaporated quickly, in part because he personally appealed to Nixon's vanity and Eisenhower's patriotism. He called Nixon, whose daughter told him, "I knew it! It wouldn't be long before he would get into trouble and have to call on you for help." Although Kennedy rejected Nixon's suggestion of direct intervention in Cuba, he flattered him by speaking candidly about politics and their shared interest in international relations. "It really is true that foreign affairs is the only important issue for a President to handle, isn't it?" Kennedy asked, knowing that Nixon agreed. "I mean, who gives a shit if the minimum wage is $1.15 or $1.25, in comparison to something like this?" Nixon promised to support him to the hilt if Kennedy attacked Cuba.

With Eisenhower, whom he invited to lunch at Camp David, the presidential retreat in Maryland's Catoctin Mountains, Kennedy played the student being lectured by the master teacher gently reprimanding him on a poor performance. "There is only one thing to do when you get into this kind of thing," Eisenhower told him. "It must be a success." Kennedy replied, "Well, I assure you that, hereafter, if we get into anything like this, it is going to be a success." Eisenhower said that he was "glad to hear that." Before the press, Eisenhower declared, "I am all in favor of the United States supporting the man who has to carry the responsibility for our foreign affairs."

With Nixon, Eisenhower, and most other public officials backing Kennedy, a Gallup poll at the end of April showed him with an 83 percent approval rating. As reassuring, 61 percent of the public supported Kennedy's "handling [of] the situation in Cuba," and 65 percent specifically opposed sending "our armed forces into Cuba to help overthrow Castro." But Kennedy could not put the failure aside. He dismissed the polls, saying, "It's just like Eisenhower. The worse I do, the more popular I get."

Because he believed that Castro now more than ever represented a threat to U.S. interests in the hemisphere, and because defeat at the Bay of Pigs gave an added incentive to topple Castro's regime, Kennedy gave a high priority to finding an effective policy for dealing with the Cuban problem. On April 21, he set up a task force to study "military and paramilitary, guerrilla and anti-guerrilla activities which fall short of outright war." The task force chairman was General Maxwell Taylor, a World War II hero whose 1959 book, The Uncertain Trumpet, had "reoriented our whole strategic thinking," Bobby said. Taylor's book affirmed JFK's opposition to massive retaliation with nuclear weapons and support for counterinsurgency forces designed to fight guerrilla wars. Bobby, Burke, and Dulles (who did not leave office until later in the year) served with Taylor and agreed to "give special attention to the lessons that can be learned from recent events in Cuba."

Though ostensibly a study group to work against a replay of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the committee quickly became a vehicle for suggesting ways to overthrow Castro. At a National Security Council meeting on May 4, Kennedy and his advisers "agreed that U.S. policy toward Cuba should aim at the downfall of Castro," but that neither a blockade nor direct military action should be the means for doing it, though U.S. intervention should remain a possibility. The study group's report of June 13 concluded, "There can be no long-term living with Castro as a neighbor." He constituted "a real menace capable of eventually overthrowing the elected governments in any one or more of weak Latin American republics."

But action against him needed to rest on a wide range of international and domestic considerations. With only 44 percent of the American public favoring aid to anti-Castro forces and 41 percent opposed, a program of clandestine subversion seemed the best of the planners' options. Decisions on exactly how to proceed were left for the future.

Despite his high approval ratings, Kennedy was disappointed with the results of his first hundred days. To be sure, he had established himself as an attractive and even inspirational leader, but rising tensions with Castro and ongoing communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia and Africa joined with a sluggish economy and civil rights divisions at home to shake Kennedy's confidence in mastering the challenges of his presidency. The May 5 edition of Time declared,
"Last week, as John Kennedy closed out the first 100 days of his administration, the U.S. suffered a month-long series of setbacks rare in the history of the Republic." Asked how he liked being president, Kennedy replied that he liked it better before the Bay of Pigs. He also described himself as "always on the edge of irritability." "Sons of bitches," Kennedy said after reading Time's critical assessment of his first hundred days. "If they want this job they can have it tomorrow."

Yet however frustrated he was by events and his own stumbles, Kennedy was determined to use the problems of his first months as object lessons in how to be more effective. His resolve stood him in good stead: He managed coming crises with greater skill and a growing conviction that he might be an above average and maybe even a memorable president after all.

CHAPTER 11

A World of Troubles

We face a relentless struggle in every corner of the globe.

— John F. Kennedy, April 20, 1961

In the fifteen years since the onset of the Cold War, Americans had struggled with their fears. The long tradition of "free security," weak neighbors, and vast oceans, which had insulated the country from foreign dangers, had done little to prepare it for a drawn-out contest with a hostile superpower convinced that its ideology and that of the United States could not coexist. The tensions over the East-West divide and America's apparently unprecedented vulnerability to attack tested the country's self-confidence.

In the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy mirrored this national anxiety. In a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors on April 20, he spoke-apocalyptically about the Cold War. "If the self-discipline of the free cannot match the iron discipline of the mailed fist— in economic, political, [and] scientific struggles as well as the military— then the peril to freedom will continue to rise," he predicted. Cuba was a case in point. "The evidence is clear—and the hour is late," he said. "We and our Latin friends will have to face the fact that we cannot postpone any longer the real issue of survival of freedom in this hemisphere itself." It was "clearer than ever that we face a relentless struggle in every corner of the globe that goes beyond the clash of armies or even nuclear weapons. . . . We dare not fail to see the insidious nature of this new and deeper struggle. . . . [which] is taking place every day, without fanfare, in thousands of villages and markets— day and night—and in classrooms all over the globe." The message underlying this clash was that "the complacent, the self-indulgent, the soft societies