

Memorandum From the Under Secretary of State (Bowles) to Secretary of State Rusk, March 31, 1961

On Tuesday, April 4th, a meeting will be held at the White House at which a decision will be reached on the Cuban adventure.

During your absence I have had an opportunity to become better acquainted with the proposal, and I find it profoundly disturbing. . . .

In considerable degree, my concern stems from a deep personal conviction that our national interests are poorly served by a covert operation of this kind at a time when our new President is effectively appealing to world opinion on the basis of high principle.

Even in our imperfect world, the differences which distinguish us from the Russians are of vital importance. This is true not only in a moral sense but in the practical effect of these differences on our capacity to rally the non-Communist world in behalf of our traditional democratic objectives.

In saying this, I do not overlook the ruthless nature of the struggle in which we are involved, nor do I ignore the need on occasion for action which is expedient and distasteful. Yet I cannot persuade myself that means can be wholly divorced from ends—even within the context of the Cold War.

Against this background, let me suggest several points which I earnestly hope will be fully taken into account in reaching the final decision.

1. In sponsoring the Cuban operation, for instance, we would be deliberately violating the fundamental obligations we assumed in the Act of Bogota establishing the Organization of American States. The Act provides:

"No State or group of States has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of any other State. The foregoing principle prohibits not only armed force but also any other form of interference or attempted threat against the personality of the State or against its political, economic and cultural elements.

"No State may use or encourage the use of coercive measures of an economic or political character in order to force the sovereign will of another State and obtain from it advantages of any kind.

"The territory of a State is inviolable; it may not be the object, even temporarily, of military occupation or of other measures of force taken by another State, directly or indirectly, on any grounds whatever"

More generally, the United States is the leading force in and substantial beneficiary of a network of treaties and alliances stretching around the world. That these treaty obligations should be recognized as binding in law and conscience is the condition not only of a lawful and orderly world, but of the mobilization of our own power.

We cannot expect the benefits of this regime of treaties if we are unwilling to accept the limitations it imposes upon our freedom to act.

2. Those most familiar with the Cuban operation seem to agree that as the venture is now planned, the chances of success are not greater than one out of three. This makes it a highly risky operation. If it fails, Castro's prestige and strength will be greatly enhanced.

The one way we can reduce the risk is by a sharply increased commitment of direct American support. . . .

3. Under the very best of circumstances, I believe this operation will have a much more adverse effect on world opinion than most people contemplate. It is admitted that there will be riots and a new wave of anti-Americanism throughout Latin America. It is also assumed that there will be many who quietly wish us well and, if the operation succeeds, will heave a sigh of relief.

Moreover, even if the reaction in Latin America is less damaging than we expect, I believe that in Europe, Asia, and Africa, the reaction against the United States will be angry and the fresh, favorable image of the Kennedy Administration will be correspondingly dimmed. . .

5. A pertinent question, of course, is what will happen in Cuba if this operation is cancelled and we limit ourselves to small and scattered operations?

There is the possibility that the Castro effort will be a failure without any further intervention from us. It is not easy to create a viable Communist state on an island, totally dependent upon open sea lanes, with a large population, and inadequate resources. As Castro applies more and more pressure, the spirit of rebellion is likely to grow.

6. It appears more likely that Castro will succeed in solidifying his political position. Although this would be sharply contrary to our national interest, it does not mean that we would be impotent to deal with him. If the Soviets should attempt to provide Castro with substantially larger amounts of arms, including naval vessels, we have the power to throw a blockade around Cuba and to extend it, if necessary, to petroleum supplies. This could bring the Cuban economy to a grinding halt within a few months.

Technically, this would be an act of war. However, I believe we would find it vastly easier to live with direct action of this kind in the face of what we could fairly describe as an open Soviet move to establish Cuba as a military base than with the covert operation now under consideration.

7. Another possibility is that Castro, once he has created sufficient military power, will move against a neighboring area, such as Haiti, the Dominican Republic, or perhaps into Central America. If this occurs, we can move to block him with whatever force is required, presumably through the Organization of American States and with the full support of the people in Latin America and elsewhere. . . .

I believe it would be a grave mistake for us to jeopardize the favorable position we have steadily developed in most of the non-Communist world by the responsible and restrained policies which are now associated with the President by embarking on a major covert adventure with such very heavy built-in risks.

I realize that this operation has been put together over a period of months. A great deal of time and money has been put into it, and many able and dedicated people have become emotionally involved in its success. We should not, however, proceed with this adventure simply because we are wound up and cannot stop. . .

Sources:

U.S., Department of State, *FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1961-1963*, Volume X, Cuba, 1961-1962.

Yale University, *Bowles Papers*, Box 300, Mansfield, Folder 536. No classification marking.