

How War Propaganda Keeps on Killing

Exclusive: The “fake news” hysteria has become the cover for the U.S. government and mainstream media to crack down on fact-based journalism that challenges Official Washington’s “group thinks,” writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A key reason why American foreign debacles have been particularly destructive mostly to the countries attacked but also to the United States is that these interventions are always accompanied by major U.S. government investments in propaganda. So, even when officials recognize a misjudgment has been made, the propaganda machinery continues to grind on to prevent a timely reversal.

In effect, Official Washington gets trapped by its own propaganda, which restricts the government’s ability to change direction even when the need for a shift becomes obvious.

After all, once a foreign leader is demonized, it’s hard for a U.S. official to explain that the leader may not be all that bad or is at least better than the likely alternative. So, it’s not just that officials start believing their own propaganda, it’s that the propaganda takes on a life of its own and keeps the failed policy churning forward.

It’s a bit like the old story of the chicken that continues to run around with its head cut off. In the case of the U.S. government, the pro-war or pro-intervention “group think” continues to run amok even after wiser policymakers recognize the imperative to change course.

The reason for that dilemma is that so much money gets spread around to pay for the propaganda and so many careers are tethered to the storyline that it’s easier to let thousands of U.S. soldiers and foreign citizens die than to admit that the policy was built on distortions, propaganda and lies. That would be bad for one’s career.

And, because of the lag time required for contracts to be issued and the money to flow into the propaganda shops, the public case for the policy can outlive the belief that the policy makes sense.

Need for Skeptics

Ideally, in a healthy democracy, skeptics both within the government and in the news media would play a key role in pointing out the flaws and weaknesses in the rationale for a conflict and would be rewarded for helping the leaders veer away

from disaster. However, in the current U.S. establishment, such self-corrections don't occur.

A current example of this phenomenon is the promotion of the New Cold War with Russia with almost no thoughtful debate about the reasons for this growing hostility or its possible results, which include potential thermonuclear war that could end life on the planet.

Instead of engaging in a thorough discussion, the U.S. government and mainstream media have simply flooded the policymaking process with propaganda, some of it so crude that it would have embarrassed Joe McCarthy and the Old Cold Warriors.

Everything that Russia does is put in the most negative light with no space allowed for a rational examination of facts and motivations – except at a few independent-minded Internet sites.

Yet, as part of the effort to marginalize dissent about the New Cold War, the U.S. government, some of its related “non-governmental organizations,” mainstream media outlets, and large technology companies are now pushing a censorship project designed to silence the few Internet sites that have refused to march in lockstep.

I suppose that if one considers the trillions of dollars in tax dollars that the Military Industrial Complex stands to get from the New Cold War, the propaganda investment in shutting up a few critics is well worth it.

Today, this extraordinary censorship operation is being carried out under the banner of fighting “fake news.” But many of the targeted Web sites, including Consortiumnews.com, have represented some of the most responsible journalism on the Internet.

At Consortiumnews, our stories are consistently well-reported and well-documented, but we do show skepticism toward propaganda from the U.S. government or anywhere else.

For instance, Consortiumnews not only challenged President George W. Bush's WMD claims regarding Iraq in 2002-2003 but we have reported on the dispute within the U.S. intelligence community about claims made by President Barack Obama and his senior aides regarding the 2013 sarin gas attack in Syria and the 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine.

In those two latter cases, Official Washington exploited the incidents as propaganda weapons to justify an escalation of tensions against the Syrian and Russian governments, much as the earlier Iraqi WMD claims were used to rally the American people to invade Iraq.

However, if you question the Official Story about who was responsible for the sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, after President Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry and the mainstream media pronounced the Syrian government guilty, you are guilty of “fake news.”

Facts Don't Matter

It doesn't seem to matter that it's been confirmed in a mainstream report by The Atlantic that Director of National Intelligence James Clapper advised President Obama that there was no “slam-dunk” evidence proving that the Syrian government was responsible. Nor does it matter that legendary investigative journalist Seymour Hersh has reported that his intelligence sources say the more likely culprit was Al Qaeda's Nusra Front with help from Turkish intelligence.

By straying from the mainstream “group think” that accuses Syrian President Bashar al-Assad of crossing Obama's “red line” on chemical weapons, you are opening yourself to retaliation as a “fake news” site.

Similarly, if you point out that the MH-17 investigation was put under the control of Ukraine's unsavory SBU intelligence service, which not only has been accused by United Nations investigators of concealing torture but also has a mandate to protect Ukrainian government secrets, you also stand accused of disseminating “fake news.”

Apparently one of the factors that got Consortiumnews included on a new “black list” of some 200 Web sites was that I skeptically analyzed a report by the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) that while supposedly “Dutch-led” was really run by the SBU. I also noted that the JIT's conclusion blaming Russia was marred by a selective reading of the SBU-supplied evidence and by an illogical narrative. But the mainstream U.S. media uncritically hailed the JIT report, so to point out its glaring flaws made us guilty of committing “fake news” or disseminating “Russian propaganda.”

The Iraq-WMD Case

Presumably, if the hysteria about “fake news” had been raging in 2002-2003, then those of us who expressed skepticism about Iraq hiding WMD would have been forced to carry a special marking declaring us to be “Saddam apologists.”

Back then, everyone who was “important” in Washington had no doubt about Iraq's WMD. Washington Post editorial page editor Fred Hiatt repeatedly stated the “fact” of Iraq's hidden WMD as flat fact and mocked anyone who doubted the “group think.”

Yet, even after the U.S. government acknowledged that the WMD allegations were a

myth – a classic and bloody case of “fake news” – almost no one who had pushed the fabrication was punished.

So, the “fake news” stigma didn’t apply to Hiatt and other mainstream journalists who actually did produce “fake news,” even though it led to the deaths of 4,500 U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. To this day, Hiatt remains the Post’s editorial-page editor continuing to enforce “conventional wisdoms” and to disparage those who deviate.

Another painful example of letting propaganda – rather than facts and reason – guide U.S. foreign policy was the Vietnam War, which claimed the lives of some 58,000 U.S. soldiers and millions of Vietnamese.

The Vietnam War raged on for years after Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and even President Lyndon Johnson recognized the need to end it. Part of that was Richard Nixon’s treachery in going behind Johnson’s back to sabotage peace talks in 1968, but the smearing of anti-war dissidents as pro-communist traitors locked many officials into support for the war well after its futility became obvious. The propaganda developed its own momentum that resulted in many unnecessary deaths.

A Special Marking

In the Internet era, there will now be new-age forms of censorship. Your Web site will be excluded from major search engines or electronically stamped with a warning about your unreliability.

Your guilt will be judged by a panel of mainstream media outlets, including some partially funded by the U.S. government, or maybe by some anonymous group of alleged experts.

With the tens of millions of dollars now sloshing around Official Washington to pay for propaganda, lots of entrepreneurs will be lining up at the trough to do their part. Congress just approved another \$160 million to combat “Russian propaganda,” which will apparently include U.S. news sites that question the case for the New Cold War.

Along with that money, the House voted 390-30 for the Intelligence Authorization Act with a Section 501 to create an Executive Branch “interagency committee to counter active measures by the Russian Federation to exert covert influence,” an invitation to expand the McCarthyistic witch hunt already underway to intimidate independent Internet news sites and independent-minded Americans who question the latest round of U.S. government propaganda.

Even if a President Trump decides that these tensions with Russia are absurd and

that the two countries can work together in the fight against terrorism and other international concerns, the financing of the New Cold War propaganda – and the pressure to conform to Official Washington’s “group think” – will continue.

The well-funded drumbeat of anti-Russian propaganda will seek to limit Trump’s decision-making. After all, this New Cold War cash cow can be milked for years to come and nothing – not even the survival of the human species – is more important than that.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

The ‘Mistaken’ US Airstrike on Syrian Troops

A close reading of the report on the U.S. airstrike that killed scores of Syrian troops and helped Islamic State capture a key base leaves many doubts about the “mistake” explanation, writes Gareth Porter for Middle East Eye.

By Gareth Porter

The [summary report on an investigation](#) into U.S. and allied air strikes on Syrian government troops has revealed irregularities in decision-making consistent with a deliberate targeting of Syrian forces.

The report, released by U.S. Central Command on Nov. 29, shows that senior U.S. Air Force officers at the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) at al-Udeid Airbase in Qatar, who were responsible for the decision to carry out the September airstrike at Deir Ezzor:

- –misled the Russians about where the U.S. intended to strike so Russia could not warn that it was targeting Syrian troops;
- –ignored information and intelligence analysis warning that the positions to be struck were Syrian government rather than Islamic State; and
- –shifted abruptly from a deliberate targeting process to an immediate strike in violation of normal Air Force procedures

Last week, Brig. Gen. Richard Coe, the lead U.S. official on the investigating team, told reporters that U.S. air strikes in Deir Ezzor on Sept. 17, [which](#)

killed at least 62 – and possibly more than 100 – Syrian army troops, was the unintentional result of “human error.”

The report itself says that the investigators found “no evidence of misconduct” – but it is highly critical of the decision process and does not offer any explanations for that series of irregularities.

The strikes against two Syrian army positions were the pivotal event in the breakdown of the Syrian ceasefire agreement reached between the United States and Russia in September. Both Moscow and Damascus denounced the strikes as a deliberate move by the Obama administration to support the Islamic State group and cited the attacks as the reason for declaring an end to the ceasefire on Sept. 19.

Lt. Gen. Jeffrey L Harrigan, commander of U.S. Air Forces Central Command and of the CAOC, who was the central figure in all the decisions, apparently had a motive for a strike against Syrian forces.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter had strongly opposed a provision in the U.S.-Russian ceasefire agreement that would have established a U.S.-Russian “joint integration center” to coordinate air strikes against both Islamic State (also known as Daesh) and the Al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, which was to become active after seven days of effective ceasefire.

But President Barack Obama supported Secretary of State John Kerry’s position and overrode Pentagon objections.

In a press briefing on Sept. 13, Harrigan stated that his readiness to join such a joint operation with the Russians “is going to depend on what the plan ends up being.” He added: “[I]t would be premature to say we’re going to jump right into it. And I’m not saying yes or no. I’m saying we’ve got work to do to understand what the plan is going to look like.”

Three days later, Harrigan’s command sent a drone to investigate a site three kilometers southwest of Deir Ezzor airfield. It showed images of a tunnel entrance, two tents and 14 adult males, according to the investigation report. That move led to a swiftly moving decision process that resulted in the air strike against two Syrian army bases the following day.

Not Telling the Russians

The investigation report summary reveals that the CAOC sent misleading information to the Russians before the strike about the location of the targets. The Russians were informed that the targets were nine kilometers south of Deir Ezzor airfield: they were actually only three and six kilometers from

that airfield, respectively, according to the summary of its findings.

The investigation report summary reveals that the CAOC sent misleading information to the Russians before the strike about the location of the targets.

Brig. Gen. Richard Coe, who briefed reporters on the team's report, acknowledged that the misleading information had prevented the Russians from intervening to stop the strike. "Had we told them accurately, they would have warned us," he told reporters.

Coe said that the provision of that misleading information to the Russians before the strike was "unintentional." However, neither he nor the redacted summary of the report offered any explanation as to how such misleading information could have been passed to the Russians unintentionally.

From its initial position above the site three kilometers from the airfield, the drone followed a vehicle to two other positions nearby, both of which also had tunnels, as well as "defensive fighting positions", including tanks and armored personnel carriers. All those characteristics would have been consistent with a Syrian Army position, especially in Deir Ezzor.

At the time the Syrian Army was fighting from fixed defensive positions to prevent the Deir Ezzor airport – the lifeline for the entire government-held portion of the city – from being overrun.

Nevertheless, those positions were quickly identified as belonging to the Islamic State, based primarily on the clothing worn by the personnel at the sites. The report describes the personnel at the two sites as dressed in "a mix of traditional wear, civilian attire and military style clothing that lacked uniformity."

But a former US intelligence analyst with long experience in image interpretation in combat situations told Middle East Eye that the claim that Islamic State militants could be distinguished from Syrian army troops on the basis of their clothing "sounds completely bogus." He said he had seen images of Syrian Republican Guards in the field who were not wearing regular uniforms or were dressed in various colors.

The report also mentions a series of what it calls "breakdowns" regarding intelligence reporting and analysis on the identification of the positions with the Islamic State that allegedly was never seen by those making the decisions on targeting.

The regional station belonging to the Air Force's Distributed Common Ground System (DCGS) is the main source of Air Force analysis of intelligence from

aerial surveillance. It responded to the initial identification of the positions as belonging to the Islamic State group by raising “concerns” that the ground force in question could not have belonged to the group. But those concerns never reached Harrigan or his staff, according to the report.

Thirty minutes before the strike was scheduled, someone called into the CAOC to report a “possible flag” in one of two target areas. The call, which contradicted the accepted identification based on the absence of flags at the site, “went unacknowledged,” according to the report.

The report also reveals that a map prepared by an intelligence agency, whose identity is redacted, that was available at the CAOC contradicted the classified map showing areas occupied by the Syrian Army and Islamic State in the vicinity of the Deir Ezzor airfield.

The classified map supported the decision to proceed with the strike. But the officials involved in targeting decisions denied any knowledge of another map.

The report and Coe’s press briefing both explained the conclusion that the positions were under Islamic State control as a result of “confirmation bias,” which means that people seek and accept information that confirms their existing biases.

But citing that concept implies that those responsible for the strike began with an interest in finding evidence to justify an action they already wanted to take.

The report is critical of the discussion on the identification issue within CAOC for focusing only on “*what could be seen on the ground rather than what we knew about the ground situation*” (emphasis in original report).

That language clearly suggests that Harrigan and his staff were ignoring basic facts about the positions of the Syrian army and Islamic State in the area that was well known to U.S. intelligence.

Switch to ‘Dynamic Targeting’

Journalist Elijah Magnier of the Kuwait daily newspaper Al Rai has followed the struggle between the Syrian army and Islamic State for control of Deir Ezzor closely for years.

He told Middle East Eye in an email that at the time of the air strike the defense of the airport depended entirely on four interconnected Syrian army positions on the Thardeh mountain chain.

Magnier said Islamic State forces had been carrying out “daily attacks” on Deir

Ezzor airport prior to the U.S. air strikes but had failed, mainly because of the higher elevation of the four Syrian bases in relation to the positions occupied by Islamic State further south.

Fabrice Balanche, a leading French expert on Syria who is now a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said in an interview with Middle East Eye that the Syrian army had maintained continuous control over the base at Thardeh mountain from March 2016 until the U.S. air strikes, which then resulted in Islamic State gaining control of it.

The report faults those who made the decisions on the targeting of the strike for failing to follow normal Air Force procedures. Originally, the CAOC had initiated a process called "Deliberate Targeting," which is used for fixed targets and requires extensive and time-consuming work to ensure the accuracy of the intelligence on the targets, according to the report. But that had been changed abruptly to "Dynamic Targeting," which involves "fleeting targets" – those that are either moving or about to move – for which intelligence requirements are less stringent.

The authors of the report found that change to be improper, given that the sites being targeted were clearly identified as defensive positions and could not justify such a switch to a hastily prepared strike. But again, it offers no explanation as to why.

The report revealed more than previous investigations into U.S. military operations that resulted in embarrassment. This can be explained by the role of its co-author, whose identity was redacted as "foreign government information." He or she is most likely a general belonging to one of the other three members of the "Operation Inherent Resolve" coalition whose planes participated in the Deir Ezzor strike, which would narrow it down to the U.K., Denmark or Australia.

The two co-authors also went through lengthy negotiations to resolve the differences in the summary report. This is indicated by the repeated postponement of the report's release, which was originally planned for two weeks earlier, according to sources at Central Command. As a result, the report was certainly less pointed in describing the decision-making than the unidentified co-author would have preferred.

The report observes that it was "unclear who has the responsibility/authority to decide between continuing deliberate target development versus conducting a dynamic strike." However such decisions could only have been made with the approval of the commander of CAOC – Lt. Gen. Harrigan, who is also commander of US Air Forces Central Command.

The decision to avoid identifying Harrigan as responsible for that decision may be related to the fact he was also the recipient of the report.

Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specializing in U.S. national security policy. His latest book is *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare* (Just World Books, 2014). [This article originally appeared at Middle East Eye.]

Warnings from the Cuban Missile Crisis

From the Archive: Fidel Castro's death at 90 was treated more as a cultural event than a moment to reflect on the danger of thermonuclear war, a risk Don North saw up close in 1962 and described 50 years later.

By Don North (Originally published on Oct. 14, 2012)

Saturday, Oct. 27, 1962, now known as "Black Saturday," was the day I arrived in Havana to report on the Cuban missile crisis, completely oblivious that 50 years later it would be considered "the most dangerous moment in human history," the day we came closest to nuclear Armageddon.

My rendezvous with this existential crisis began on Oct. 22, in a New York bar where I had arranged to meet friends and incidentally to watch a TV address by President John F. Kennedy that was supposed to have something to do with Cuba. I had visited Cuba as a freelance journalist six months earlier and was fascinated by the country.

Kennedy's TV address was a shocker. "Unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island," Kennedy said looking grim. A hush fell over the bar and waiters stopped serving to hear his words.

After 50 years of study and analysis we now know that in addition to the nuclear-armed missiles, the Soviet Union had deployed 100 tactical nuclear weapons, which the Soviet commander in Cuba could have launched without additional approval from Moscow.

A U.S. naval blockade of Cuba had begun the day before Kennedy's speech. "A strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated," the President said.

As Kennedy spoke the U.S. Strategic Air Command (SAC) had gone to DEFCON-3,

(Defense Condition Three) two steps down from nuclear war, and dispersed its nuclear-armed bomber fleet around the United States. The Cold War had suddenly grown hot.

A truthful history of those dark days was the first casualty. Although tape recordings of White House meetings on the crisis were made, they were kept classified until ten years ago, as many of the participants worked to burnish or obscure their position at that time. Bobby Kennedy made a pre-emptive strike on history by writing and publishing his book, *Thirteen Days*, a self-serving recollection of the crisis.

We now know that JFK's covert war against Cuba dubbed "Operation Mongoose," a campaign of harassment and sabotage had contributed to the war of nerves that led the Russians to step in to the defense of Cuba. However, as transcripts of the taped White House meetings of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm) would reveal when declassified decades later, JFK used cool political skill and all his intellect to prevent a possible nuclear war.

As he told the ExComm members, as he ordered the dangerous naval blockade to go into effect, "What we are doing is throwing down a card on the table in a game which we don't know the ending of."

The taped record of how JFK played his hand trying to contain the chaotic forces of history in the face of unyielding pressure from hawkish advisers like Generals Curtis Le May and Maxwell Taylor shows the crisis was a supreme test of the President's ability to maintain an open mind, while holding to his entrenched abhorrence of war.

It is a cautionary tale to remember as we contemplate a possible future showdown with a nuclear-armed Russia or China and the need to evaluate a prospective President by his or her possession of sound judgment and emotional stability when those characteristics can make the difference between a peaceful compromise and a catastrophic war.

Hugh Sidey, a journalist who was a friend of Kennedy and covered the White House for Time magazine at the time of the crisis, had this to say in appraising JFK's leadership: "Once in the Presidency there is virtually no time for re-education or introspection that might show a President where he is right or wrong and bring about a true change of mind. Events move too fast. A President may pick up more knowledge about a subject or find an expert aide on whom he can rely, but in most instances when he is alone and faced with a crucial decision he must rely on his intuition, a mixture of natural intelligence, education, and experience."

Self-Assigned to Havana

Although a few weeks earlier I had finally landed a job as a news writer on the NBC evening news, I was ready to chuck it for the opportunity to report from a key city during the missile crisis where few foreign journalists were based. I walked across the street from NBC studios in Rockefeller Center to the Life magazine office.

Although I hadn't worked for Life before and only owned an inexpensive Kodak, I was ushered in to see a senior editor and was immediately loaded down with several Leica camera bodies, an assortment of lenses and a brick of fast 35mm film. Life didn't have a man in Havana and for this story they would risk taking a chance on a youthful broadcast news writer with some Cuba contacts willing to travel into ground zero for American ICBM's and bombers.

"Don, you're our man in Havana now," said the editor in a well-cut gray suit. "Get some good shots, write some snappy cut lines and give us the story of Havana at the center of the storm."

New Yorkers were scared. Newspapers carried illustrations of New York and Washington as targets within the range of the Soviet ICBMs now operational from Cuba. Lines formed at grocery stores and gas stations. Friends made plans to drive their children to relatives' homes in less vulnerable areas of the country.

My sister Helen had recently arrived from Canada to work as a nurse at the Roosevelt Hospital in central Manhattan. We shared a small apartment. I was reluctant to leave her alone in a city perhaps facing a devastating enemy attack. Her hospital was already planning for handling casualties.

My first stop was Miami to consult with my friend Miguel Acocca, Time magazine's man in the Caribbean. Miguel said I had two choices. The first was to link up with the U.S. Second Marine Division preparing landing craft in Key West for an invasion of Cuba. It would be called Operation Scabbards and be comparable to the Normandy landings in 1944. It would involve eight divisions, around 120,000 troops, and land on a 40-mile front between Mariel and Tarara Beach, east of Havana.

Or my second choice was to try to get on a Cubana Airlines flight left outside Cuba when the blockade went into effect, that would be returning to Cuba in the next few days from Mexico City.

I knew Mario Garcia-Inchaustigi, the Cuban ambassador in Mexico. We had shared many a rum and coke at the Delegates Lounge in the United Nations when he was the Cuban delegate and I was an announcer for U.N. General Assembly sessions. If

there was any chance of a visa and a ticket on that flight, Mario could arrange it. I cabled the Embassy explaining my situation and took the next flight to Mexico.

With a visa in hand, purchasing a ticket on the Cubana flight was easy. The only passengers confirmed were members of an East German soccer team. Boarding the flight I was aware from monitoring recent radio broadcasts that it was a sensitive time to be arriving in Havana. The first Soviet ship to test the American blockade, the *Grozny*, was reported about to encounter U.S. Navy ships.

Earlier, in a radio broadcast Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had warned, "if the United States carries out the piratical actions, we shall have to resort to means of defense against the aggressor to defend our rights."

Along with the youthful soccer team from East Berlin, there were five other international journalists on board the flight: a fellow Canadian Robert MacNeil of NBC; Gordian Troeller, a Luxemburger and his wife Marie Claude, both working for the German magazine *Der Stern*; Atsuhiko Horikawa, Washington correspondent of the Japanese *Yomiuri Shimbun*, a Tokyo daily; and Alan Oxley, a British freelancer who worked for CBS News and lived in Havana.

Not Welcome in Havana

Walking from the plane into the dark, hot, humid Havana air was not unpleasant and costumed guitarists strummed a welcome as we entered the passenger terminal. A giant poster declaring that Cuba was "en pie de Guerra" (on war alert) graced the terminal building.

Inside, men in battle fatigues with side arms or carrying machine guns eyed arriving passengers suspiciously. My visa was stamped and I was directed to an adjacent room where my fellow journalists were being held. In a few minutes, soldiers with machine guns at the ready ordered us in Spanish to take our luggage and board an army truck waiting outside.

We were driven to the center of Havana to a small, modern hotel called The Capri. The officer in charge informed us politely in English that we were to be "guests of the Cuban government." We were given room keys and escorted under armed guard to rooms on the ninth floor. Two guards with machine guns were posted outside our rooms.

The Capri Hotel was located in the heart of downtown Havana, a few blocks from the Havana Hilton and the old Hotel Nacional. I lay in my bed trying to sleep but kept thinking about a U.S. Pentagon study of nuclear war effects on different size cities. If the worst happened overnight and U.S. ICBMs dropped a one megaton bomb on Havana, it would vaporize my hotel leaving a crater 1,000

feet wide and 200 feet deep. The blast would destroy virtually everything within a 1.7 mile radius.

Of the two million inhabitants hundreds of thousands living in central Havana would be killed instantly. Tens of thousands more would die of radiation within hours. Fires would rage across the rest of the city as far as the Soviet military headquarters in El Chico, 12 miles from city center.

But confined to our hotel, we were oblivious to the momentous events unfolding on Black Saturday:

—A U.S. Air Force U-2 reconnaissance aircraft had been shot down while on a mission to photograph the Soviet missiles. The pilot, Major Rudolf Anderson, was killed.

—A U.S. Air Force U-2 accidentally strayed into Soviet airspace near Alaska and Soviet interceptors gave chase.

—Defense Secretary Robert McNamara reported the Soviet ship *Grozny* was steadily approaching the Cuban quarantine line.

—Six low level U.S. “Crusader” reconnaissance flights had been forced to turn back by Cuban ground fire while photographing missile sites.

—The U.S. Navy located and dropped practice depth charges to force four Soviet “Foxtrot” nuclear armed submarines to surface.

—The Soviet Union and the United States both conducted atmospheric nuclear tests on this day.

—Two Cuban exiles dispatched by the CIA under the Mongoose program had set explosive charges at the Metahambre copper mine in Pinar Del Rio. The two were captured by Cuban police.

Any one of these incidents could have provoked a nuclear response in the tense “eye-ball to eye-ball” atmosphere that prevailed that day. Twenty-four Soviet SAM sites were now operational.

But there were stories within each of those stories. For instance, the CIA flew slightly better U-2's than the U.S. Air Force; they had a more powerful engine and could fly 5,000 feet higher. President Kennedy preferred to have Air Force pilots flying over Cuba than CIA pilots as fewer questions would be asked if they were shot down. The CIA reluctantly agreed to lend several of its U-2's to the Air Force and they were repainted with Air Force insignia.

As one U-2 approached the missile site at Banes, in Western Cuba near

Guantanamo, an order came from Soviet military headquarters in El Chico near Havana, "Destroy target number 33. Use two missiles." A proximity fuse detonated the SAMs as they closed in, spraying shrapnel and killing Major Rudolf Anderson instantly.

Declassified Soviet sources have confirmed the missile was not cleared to fire by the Kremlin. Furious, Khrushchev ordered no further firings take place without his direct orders. In Washington, Air Force Gen. Curtis Le May ordered rocket-carrying fighters readied for an attack on the SAM site. The White House ordered Le May not to attack unless he had direct orders from the President.

"He chickened out again," Le May growled. "How in hell do you get men to risk their lives when the SAMs are not attacked?"

Thousands of miles away, a U-2 flying out of Eielson Air Force base in Alaska on a mission to monitor air samples during the Soviet nuclear test that day became disoriented and flew some 400 miles into Soviet airspace. The pilot was Captain Chuck Maltsby.

The Soviets could well have regarded this U-2 flight as a last-minute intelligence reconnaissance in preparation for nuclear war. Soviet MIG aircraft tried to intercept the U-2 flying at 75,000 feet but could not reach that altitude. Alaskan Command sent up two nuclear armed F-102 interceptors to protect the U-2.

When President Kennedy was later told about the incident he replied, "There's always some sonofabitch who doesn't get the word."

Six U.S. Navy "Crusaders" flying at tree-top level under Soviet radar headed westward to photograph the missile sites of Pinar Del Rio. Antiaircraft guns manned by Cuban crews opened fire as the Crusaders approached the San Cristobal missile site. The pilots, aware of multiple hits, aborted the mission and flew home to Key West.

Soviet submarine commanders were highly disciplined and unlikely to trigger their nuclear torpedoes by design, but we now know the unstable conditions on board the subs raised the specter of an accidental nuclear launch. U.S. Navy ships had located four Soviet "Foxtrot" submarines lurking in the waters south of the Turks and Caicos Islands.

Each day the subs had to surface to charge their batteries and report to Moscow. Once located the subs were forced to surface by U.S. Naval ships dropping hand grenades and practice depth charges.

On "Black Saturday," Oct. 27, 1962, one sub B-59, commanded by Captain Valentin

Savitsky, had been chased for two days. His batteries were low and he had not been able to communicate with Moscow. Temperatures in the sub reached as high as 140 degrees, food was spoiling in the refrigerators and water was low and rationed. Carbon dioxide levels were becoming critical and sailors were fainting from heat and exhaustion.

Submerged several hundred feet the sub came under repeated attack from the *USS Randolph* dropping practice depth charges. The explosions became deafening. There is no greater humiliation for a submarine captain than to be forced by the enemy to surface. Forty years later, a senior sub officer on B-59, Vadim Orlov, described the scene as Captain Sevitsky lost his temper.

"Savitsky became furious. He summoned the officer in charge of the nuclear torpedo, and ordered him to make it combat ready. 'We're going to blast them now,' said Savitsky. 'We will perish ourselves, but we will sink them all. We will not disgrace our Navy.'" Fellow officers persuaded Savitsky to calm down and a decision was made to surface in the midst of four American destroyers.

A Spy and Journalist Out of Their Depth

In Washington, a Russian KGB officer and an ABC News reporter inserted themselves in the drama. Aleksandr Feklisov, the KGB station chief, had approached ABC News State Department correspondent John Scali with a plan to dismantle missile bases in Cuba in return for a U.S. pledge not to invade. Scali ran it past Secretary of State Dean Rusk and got his approval.

Their meddling was a classic case of miscommunication between Washington and Moscow at a time when a misstep could have led to nuclear war. By Scali's account it had been a Soviet initiative. Feklisov presented it as an American one. What Scali thought was a feeler from Moscow was in reality an attempt by the KGB to measure Washington's conditions for a settlement.

Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin said he had not authorized this type of negotiation and refused to send Feklisov's messages to Moscow. Feklisov could only send his negotiation report with Scali by cable to KGB headquarters. There is no evidence the cable was ever read by Khrushchev or played any part in Kremlin decision-making. Yet, the Scali-Feklisov meetings would become part of the strange mythology of the Cuban missile crisis.

I later came to know Scali as a very undiplomatic diplomatic correspondent given to outbursts of temper. I was a correspondent for ABC News in Vietnam and not supportive of the war. Scali was a hawk whose Vietnam visits were choreographed by President Lyndon Johnson and Gen. William Westmoreland. He often trumpeted his role as mediator in the missile crisis and was later named

U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations by President Richard Nixon.

Before "Black Saturday" ended President Kennedy got more bad news. The CIA determined for the first time that five out of six medium-range missile sites in Cuba were fully operational. With the sand in the glass almost gone that evening, Kennedy sent his brother Robert to meet with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to warn him U.S. military action was imminent. At the same time, Khrushchev was offered a possible way out. Pull his missiles out of Cuba and the U.S. would promise not to invade and also withdraw missiles from Turkey.

Radio News

In Havana, our Japanese colleague Horikawa had a powerful Zenith shortwave radio and we spent a lot of time Sunday listening to news broadcasts from Miami. Khrushchev had "blinked." Moscow radio broadcast a long letter Khrushchev wrote to Kennedy agreeing to remove the missiles from Cuba under U.N. inspection. Kennedy in return agreed not to invade Cuba. The crisis between the world's superpowers was waning. However, Fidel Castro was furious over the settlement and felt betrayed by his Soviet friends.

We continued to be his guests. We were fed regularly, but monotonously from the hotel kitchen. It was mostly "arroz con pollo," chicken with rice. It helped to wash it down with Bulgarian red wine at \$5 a bottle. And to make meals an even more festive occasion we ordered Cuban cigars and Russian Vodka at a nominal price in U.S. dollars. Periodically on the Miami NBC radio station, it was reported that six international journalists who had flown into Havana had not been heard from and were considered "missing."

On Monday, another day passed and no one came to see us. The guards did not communicate. We spent a lot of time trying to be journalists, jotting in our journals whatever we could observe from our room windows. Looking down toward the harbor, we could see a lot of ships, including Soviet freighters that had passed through the blockade.

On the Malecon, the seaside street, we could see an anti-aircraft battery manned by Cuban soldiers. Regularly, U.S. Navy "Crusader" reconnaissance planes flew over our hotel very low. But we never saw the anti-aircraft battery engage them as the speedy jets screamed overhead.

Platoons of "milicianos," male and female civilians on military duty, often marched through the streets in view of our hotel. On Cuban radio or even the hotel sound system, patriotic music interrupted by urgent announcements of news bulletins and excerpts from speeches of Fidel kept the country charged up for war. Cubans were told regularly to expect an invasion by the United States.

Whoever was in charge seemed to have forgotten about us. We were never mistreated, but simply held incommunicado. From the first day we began plotting ways to draw attention to our dilemma.

One afternoon I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw two old friends from my childhood in Canada drinking at an outdoor cafe just below my window. Doug Buchanan and Rod McKenzie were pilots for International Air Freighters flying Toronto to Havana. We hastily wrote a letter addressed to the Havana Associated Press office listing our names, nationalities and the circumstances of our house arrest and tossed it through the window louvers to the old friends lurking below.

As fate would have it, the letter floated down nine stories and came to rest on the roof of a guard post below. The two pilots perhaps emboldened by rum and cokes climbed up to the roof of the guard post to retrieve the letter, whereupon the guards seized them and marched them off at gunpoint.

The next day, Alan Oxley, the British journalist whose home was Havana, spotted a girlfriend in a bikini sunning herself on the roof of an apartment building adjacent to our hotel. Alan shouted to her to bring her baby and try to visit us in the hotel. Within an hour she arrived pushing a baby buggy and the guards allowed her in to visit with Alan. Before she left we slipped the letter to AP into the baby's diaper but the crafty guards searched on the way out and found the letter.

Phone Home

The following day, Horikawa, the Japanese journalist suggested a new plan to make contact with the outside world. The phones in our rooms were all dead, shut off at the switchboard. We screwed off the plates in the wall where the phone wires entered and found a gathering of multicolored wires. With a razor blade we slit each of the wires and inserted the phone terminal connections.

Our theory was that by trial and error we would eventually tap into wires connected to another room and the call would register at reception as coming from another room. We intercepted conversations in Russian, Spanish and Chinese, before finally tapping into phone lines of an empty room. At last we got a dial tone and called the number for the Associated Press. The AP already knew who we were, but promised to contact the Embassy of each of us being held.

All the wires were somehow jammed back into the wall as if they had never been tampered with. It was just in time, as the hotel manager and receptionist came to the ninth floor and ordered the guards to inspect an empty room where they claimed telephone calls were being made. Later that day, the Miami radio station

reported our names and that we were being held under house arrest in The Capri.

Still no one came to visit and time passed very slowly. Robert MacNeil, who had recently come from assignment in London, had a pocketful of British half pennies and introduced us to the popular pub game in Britain called "Shove Ha'penny." It involved hitting a half penny with your palm and sending it into a pattern of lines on the table. First person to fill the rows wins the game. We played for hours.

On our fourth day of confinement, Oct. 30, we heard on the radio that Castro had rejected the Washington-Moscow settlement. U Thant flew in to Havana to attempt to persuade him but failed. Three days later, on Nov. 4, the Soviets sent in their prime negotiator, Anastas Mikoyan, to reason with Castro. By then, we had been under house arrest for nine days.

Free at Last

Raul Lazo, a young junior officer at the Cuban Foreign Ministry, quietly called on us that evening and simply said we were free to go and report as we liked. "I hope you will forgive us for having detained you. Please understand the crisis made it necessary," he said.

To celebrate our freedom, Robert MacNeil and I checked out the thriving nightclub in The Capri, whose loud music had kept us awake while under house arrest. The big Havana hotels still featured lavish floor shows, typical of pre-revolutionary decadence with leggy dancers in brief costumes. Tables were crowded with well-dressed couples drinking rum or vodka. The air was heavy with aromatic Cuban cigar smoke.

Enjoying our first night of freedom we took a late night stroll that took us past the Havana TV station. A large black limousine pulled up and out stepped Commandante Che Guevara wearing army fatigues, his signature beret with a red star and a large Cohiba cigar clenched in his teeth. Che had been in his military headquarters in a limestone cave in Pinar Del Rio throughout the crisis. This was his first night back in Havana. A small group of admirers quickly surrounded him and he signed a few autographs.

I approached with my flash camera and said, "Por favor, Commandante." Che smiled without removing his cigar and I shot a close-up head shot against the night background. (Later at home in New York, the photo when processed was sharp and clear and I fancied becoming a millionaire from poster and t-shirt sales. Alas, the color slide of Che later went missing when an airline lost my suitcase.)

Lively bars with bands and dance floors were open late that night. Robert and I took a table and ordered a final Daiquiri to toast our freedom. A friendly

waiter discovered that we were Canadian journalists. A few minutes later a spotlight hit our table as the master of ceremonies said, "Bienvenidos, amigos periodistas Canadianse."

Then, the spotlight swung to a table just behind us. "Bienvenidos, companero sovietico," said the announcer. Sitting in the spotlight was Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the famous Russian poet. We sent him a drink and introduced ourselves. Yevtushenko was working on a heroic film about Castro. He had written a poem that would appear on the front page of *Pravda*, the Moscow daily:

*America, I'm writing to you from Cuba,
Where the cheekbones of tense sentries
And the cliffs shine anxiously tonight
Through the gusting storm.
A tabaquero with his pistol heads for the port.
A shoemaker cleans an old machine gun,
A showgirl, in a soldier's laced-up boots,
Marches with a carpenter to stand guard.
America, I'll ask you in plain Russian;
Isn't it shameful and hypocritical
That you have forced them to take up arms
And then accuse them of having done so?
I heard Fidel speak. He outlined his case
Like a doctor or a prosecutor.
In his speech, there was no animosity,
Only bitterness and reproach. America, it will be
difficult to regain the grandeur that you have lost
Through your blind games, While a little island,
standing firm, became a great country.*

First thing Monday morning all six of us who had been held in The Capri turned up at the Foreign Ministry as instructed to obtain press credentials so we could cable or phone our reports. We were told the officials responsible for press accreditation were out of town and to try again "manana."

Dangerous Company

On my first trip to Havana, in March 1962, I had met Larry Lunt, a friendly American who owned a large ranch called Finca San Andres in Pinar Del Rio province, about a hundred miles west of Havana. He had been very helpful to me and had brought me along to many Embassy parties. I spent several weekends as his guest at the ranch.

Larry was a World War II and Korean War veteran and had been a rancher in Wyoming until moving to Cuba in 1955. He had not been a fan of Batista and was pleased when Castro took over in 1959. Soon he was appalled by Fidel's move to Communism, but in conversations with me did not harshly denounce the regime or its ruinouseconomic policies. I repeatedly called a number I had for Larry's apartment in Havana. It never answered and I assumed he was at his ranch without a phone.

The maxim that a person is known by the company he keeps is especially true in Cuba. In numerous trips to Cuba as a journalist and a tourist I always assumed the phones in my hotel were bugged, but I never felt I was under surveillance. Certainly Larry Lunt was under surveillance when I befriended him in March 1962. Unknown to me Larry Lunt was a CIA agent.

I read a newspaper in 1965 that reported Lunt had been arrested and imprisoned in Havana. There were no other reports that came to my attention until I learned of a book he had written and published in 1990 *Leave me my Spirit*. It's a remarkable memoir of Lunt's 14 years in a Cuban prison and his work as a CIA agent.

Lunt had been recruited and trained by the CIA before moving to Cuba. Under the agency's guidance, he bought the farm as a base for secret operations. In his book, Lunt described running numerous Cuban agents who were in a position to provide intelligence. His ranch covered hundreds of acres and was ideal for air drops of saboteurs, arms, explosives and ammunition. He had provided early reports that the San Cristobal missile site photographed by U-2's in October 1962 was a Soviet intermediate-range missile site.

Each month, Larry relayed a report from one agent who was an engineer at the Matahambre copper mine near his ranch. The mine produced 20,000 tons of copper a year, mostly for export to the Soviet Union. The CIA in its "Operation Mongoose"

unsuccessfully tried to sabotage Matahambre 25 times. Even during the October crisis, two agents who had planted bombs at the mine were captured by Castro forces.

In 1979, Lunt was released and deported in an exchange of prisoners. Many spies in Cuba had been executed for lesser crimes than Lunt. However, his book is an eloquent view of inhuman conditions in Cuban prisons and of his unconquerable spirit that helped him to survive.

Pacifying Fidel

Every day we assembled at the Foreign Ministry in quest of Cuban press cards and every day we were told to try again tomorrow. Fidel was furious with his Soviet friends for caving in to U.S. demands and had even rejected a Soviet proposal for international inspection. U Thant had come and gone from Havana, and on Nov. 2, Khrushchev's principal deputy Anastas Mikoyan arrived in Havana to persuade Fidel to agree to inspection and removal of the Ilyusian-28 bombers.

Castro grudgingly met Mikoyan's plane, but refused to meet with him for days. At the bar of the Havana Libre Hilton, I chanced to meet a Canadian pilot who had flown in with Mikoyan's plane. In 1962, Canadian pilots were required on flights out of Gander airport in Newfoundland. He would be pleased to keep me informed on Mikoyan's schedule and planned departure date which would indicate his tough negotiations with Castro were over.

The Hilton bar was probably the most conspicuous watering hole in Havana and again if Cuban intelligence was noticing the company I kept, it would not enhance my daily request for a press card.

One of the most well-informed and influential diplomats in Havana was Dwight Fullford, second secretary at the Canadian Embassy. I learned he had pressed the Foreign Ministry hard for my release from house arrest. On the fourth evening after my release from the hotel, Dwight and his wife Barbara invited me for dinner at a popular Havana restaurant. We had just met on a street corner and Dwight excused himself to buy cigarettes.

Standing on the corner talking with Barbara, I was astonished to see a black limousine pull up and two men in suits jump out. They grabbed me forcefully, shoved me into the car and in a screech of tires sped away leaving Barbara to explain the sudden disappearance of their dinner guest. Dwight, like the responsible diplomat he was, went back to the Embassy to again work the phone lines on my behalf to the Foreign Ministry.

I was taken to a small jail near the harbor which was used for immigration cases. Within an hour most of the journalists held in The Capri had been rounded

up and again became guests of the government, this time in a grimy cell. The next morning a diplomat from the Canadian Embassy dropped by to say the Cubans had decided to deport us to Mexico, the only place Cubana Airlines was flying that week.

There was a hitch. The Mexicans had refused to receive supposed criminals from a Cuban jail. The diplomat said he was working on it.

The next three days passed slowly behind bars. We scratched our names and the date on the cement wall along with thousands of other past prisoners. A young Nicaraguan who spoke excellent English said his name was Raul and tried to engage us in constant conversation. He was obviously a government plant and we regaled him with glowing admiration for the Cuban revolution, Fidel and Che, hoping he would report on us favorably.

There was a TV set mounted high on the wall that we could view through the bars. Each evening of our stay they broadcast a serial based on Ernest Hemmingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In his later years Hemmingway had lived in Havana and his books were still popular there.

One morning our luggage that we had left in the hotel when we were seized was brought to our cell. Nothing seemed to be missing from mine, but books, letters and private papers had notes pinned to them with Spanish translations written on stationery of the Cuban Security police. For some reason I had brought along a small song book from the University of British Columbia, my alma mater. Several of the songs, like a Scottish drinking song, had been labeled as secret code.

The next morning, the head guard announced we would be released later that day. However, pointing at the substantial beard I had grown since arriving in Cuba, he said, "Senor North, before you can be released you must shave your beard. In Cuba only Fidelistas have beards and you're not a Fidelista."

I protested but he was adamant. No shave, no freedom. A dull Gillette was produced with no shaving soap or hot water and with a gun in my back I stood at the sink and painfully shaved.

Mexico had agreed to issue transit visas and we were booked on a flight to New York leaving two hours after our arrival. We were deported without ceremony.

Summing Up Fifty Years

Perhaps the best book looking back on the dark days of October 1962 is *One Minute to Midnight* by journalist Michael Dobbs. In summing up how catastrophe was averted, Dobbs wrote:

“Despite all their differences, both personal and ideological, the two men had reached similar conclusions about the nature of nuclear war. Nikita Khrushchev and John Kennedy both understood that such a war would be far more terrible than anything mankind had known before. They also understood that a commander in chief could not always control his own armies. In short they were both human beings flawed, idealistic, blundering, sometimes brilliant, often mistaken, but ultimately very aware of their own humanity.”

Despite everything that divided them, they had a sneaking sympathy for each other, an idea expressed best by Jackie Kennedy in a private letter she sent to Khrushchev following her husband’s assassination:

“You and he were adversaries, but you were allied in a determination that the world should not be blown up. The danger which troubled my husband was that war might be started not so much by the big men as by the little ones. While big men know the need for self-control and restraint, little men are sometimes moved more by fear and pride.”

In retrospect it is clear the United States needs its President not to be so overdosed with his own testosterone or so obsessed by his own insecurities that he not only understands the meaning of nuance but is actually prepared to conduct relations with the rest of the world in a balanced, thoughtful manner.

Ultimately it means showing the judgment of a John Kennedy rather than the belligerence of a Gen. Curtis LeMay. The danger today may not be as high as in October 1962, but it is not hard to imagine that another nuclear crisis could arise.

In 50 years, we have learned a great deal about the events of October 1962, but do we know the full truth even today? The British think tank, Royal Institute of International Affairs, in writing on this subject concludes:

“We believe that even if we knew every detail about the crisis it would not mean we could write a definitive history, even if that history were to be written from the perspectives of each participant in turn. The reason for this is that motivations and intentions are rarely revealed and are usually inconsistent across time if not at each specific moment.”

In March 2001, at a conference on the missile crisis held in a hotel at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba, I interviewed Arthur Schlesinger who had been a close adviser and speechwriter for Kennedy at the time of the crisis. Schlesinger told me:

“History is an argument without end. No historian would use the word definitive because new times bring new preoccupations and we historians realize we are prisoners of our own experience. As Oscar Wilde used to say, one duty we owe to

history is to rewrite it.”

Don North has covered some of the most dangerous stories of the past half century, including the Cuban missile crisis and conflicts in Vietnam, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Nicaragua and the Middle East. North’s *Inappropriate Conduct* told the story of a Canadian war correspondent in Italy in 1944 who operated at the risky front line between truth and propaganda in wartime.

The Werewolves Who Hated Castro

The Little Havana celebrations of Fidel Castro’s death last month had a touch of mean-spirited delusion since perhaps Castro’s greatest achievement was defying American power and living to die of old age, observes Greg Maybury.

By Greg Maybury

Considering the deluge of bitterness and pique oozing from many in the U.S. political establishment in response to the death recently of Cuba’s former leader Fidel Castro, even some folks with more than a passing knowledge of key world events and history in general, might’ve been left wondering what all the fuss was about. Castro – a man as reviled as he was revered – led that country’s 1959 revolution, one of the most portentous tipping points in the Cold War, if not in modern history.

The following might serve at the outset to give such people an idea as to why his passing provoked such a bilious response from Washington. As Wayne Smith, a former U.S. diplomat and ambassador to Cuba in the early years of Castro’s reign under President Dwight Eisenhower (Smith was later President Jimmy Carter’s Cuban representative), once memorably opined, “Cuba seems to have the same effect on US administrations as the full moon has on werewolves.”

Now Smith might’ve said this almost three decades ago, but as the reaction to the Cuban leader’s death indicated, this reality persists, despite the recent thaw in official relations initiated by President Obama. To be sure, there’s rarely been a shortage of countries that could lay claim to having this transformative effect on the collective psyche of U.S. political establishment, Iran being a prime example.

But it is Cuba that stands out as an exemplar, and so much of that has to do with Castro himself. Put simply, among the iconic revolutionary’s many talents was an unerring ability to get up Uncle Sam’s nose, and get away with it so

often for so long. Suffice to say, since they seem to have inherited the same basic instincts as their forebears, the bulk of present-day Washington's "Werewolves" must've been privately "howling at the moon" as it were at the *Comandante's* demise at age 90.

Castro was the only world leader who resisted U.S. hegemony and lived to tell the tale, surviving by some accounts more than 630 separate assassination attempts over decades. Indeed, it would not be a surprise if the individual who came up with the expression "terminate with extreme prejudice" had Fidel in mind.

Such is the animus towards all things Cuba and Castro, President George W. Bush refused his offer to provide teams of doctors to assist the Hurricane Katrina relief effort in 2005, one of modern America's worst natural disasters. And with folks like former House Speaker Newt Gingrich labeling Castro a "tyrant" and likewise President-elect Donald Trump dismissing the former Cuban leader as a "brutal dictator" (while also placing in doubt the future of the recent rapprochement with Cuba), it's clear that "animus" is still alive and kicking. For many, Castro's passing is unlikely to change this much. The Werewolves have long memories.

A Historic Turning Point

Although Castro came to power at the tail end of the Eisenhower era, he was catapulted to world prominence shortly after the inauguration of President John F Kennedy in 1961. It was on JFK's watch that the attempts to assassinate Castro began in earnest, all under cover of the infamous Operation Mongoose; this decidedly dodgy "black-op" involved the CIA working in collaboration with the Mafia no less, and assorted pissed-off Cuban expatriates, exiles, and Batista regime "refugees," all seeking to take back the "farm." All this was with the full knowledge of JFK's brother Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

Although there is much conjecture as to whether JFK actually did know himself about Mongoose's key objective, some find it difficult to accept he *didn't* know given the brothers were "joined at the hip." If indeed JFK did know, then he either ordered those involved – including Bobby – to stop *and* they were ignored, *or* JFK acquiesced. In the latter case, while he may not have been happy with doing so, such was the pressure on him over the Cuban "situation," he may have gone along with it reluctantly. Like with so much of the JFK mythology, we may never know the answer.

Either way, Castro reportedly was deeply disturbed by JFK's 1963 assassination, and the *Comandante* had good reason. Quite apart from having his hopes dashed for a rapprochement with the U.S. (JFK had earlier opened a back-channel

communication link with the Cuban government, seeking to ease the tensions between them), Castro knew full well that if the U.S. could plausibly blame him for JFK's murder – which he instinctively felt they'd try to do and which may have been the intention of those who engineered the hit – it would surely have escalated U.S. attacks on Cuba.

The following should further underscore the significant role played by Cuba during the Cold War. When asked in the acclaimed 2003 Errol Morris film *Fog of War* about the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis – specifically, “how close” did the U.S. and the USSR come to an all-out nuclear exchange – then U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara chillingly revealed that the two powers came “*that close*” (picture a grim-faced McNamara putting the tips of his thumb and forefinger so close there was little daylight between them).

The missile crisis was itself precipitated by Castro, who became an ally of the Soviet Union not long after the revolution of 1959 and who feared a full-scale U.S. invasion after the botched attempt at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. He invited Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev to put some medium-range nuclear ballistic missiles on the island country (a counterpoint to U.S. missiles installed in Turkey).

As Cuba was located less than 90 miles from Florida, this triggered the scariest, most public, and potentially apocalyptic standoff between the two nuclear superpower archrivals. The stakes for humanity had never been greater.

Botched Regime Change

At this point it's instructive to look back at some of the *pre-revolution* history of Cuba and its relationship with its giant neighbor. For our purposes though it is both sufficient and necessary to consider in some detail that other seminal historical tipping point of the Cold War involving Cuba and America, the Bay of Pigs invasion.

For those “buffs” of America's regime change track record, along with its recidivistic propensity for interfering in the affairs – and ruthlessly exploiting both the resources and people – of other countries, the story of Cuba is one with which most will be well acquainted. From the early-to-mid 1950s, Castro fomented a popular revolution, and in 1959 after years of vicious, oppressive and corrupt rule by the U.S. client-dictator Fulgencio Batista, the rebels ousted him.

This is not an unfamiliar motif in the U.S. foreign policy narrative whereby the world's loudest exponent of liberty, human rights, democracy, freedom and the rule of law, consistently relied on “klepto-brutocracies” like Batista's to

deliver *anything but* the above to their own people, almost always with varying degrees of unerring, bloody, tragic failure for them.

As for Batista, he'd earned his rightful place in the Client Dictators' Hall of Fame, and then some. For years his rule generated deep-seated discontent, all of which seemed to go unnoticed by the Americans. He, his cronies and the Cuban elites of the era were enthusiastic supporters and beneficiaries of American business involvement in Cuba and, in particular, of the Mob (Batista was in the pocket of the notorious Mafia *capo di tutt'i capi* Meyer Lansky). All were making millions from gambling, prostitution, hospitality and tourism while bleeding the country dry and leaving the general populace far below the poverty line.

To say the Cuban people then were unhappy campers does not begin to describe the political, economic and social climate at the time. Eventually the chickens came home to roost for Batista as they do for most of America's client dictators, although usually too late for those who've suffered under their sclerotic rule.

Much like the Shah of Iran 20 years later and Mobuto Sese Seko in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1997 to name just two examples, the U.S. left its hapless client up that brown creek without a paddle when it became obvious just how restless the natives were and how little the Americans could do about it.

In order to avoid having his corrupt and brutal ass tarred and feathered by his ungrateful subjects and run out of town, Batista quit his day job and rode off into the sunset, consoling himself by filling his saddlebags with a large swag of looted booty.

Castro, along with his brother Raul (who in 2008 took over the presidency), aided memorably by Marxist revolutionary, Argentinian doctor Chè Guevara, assumed control of the country. They quickly kicked out the Americans along with the Mafia, and nationalized most of their industries and businesses.

For Lansky and the rest of the Mob in particular, their Golden Cuban Goose was cooked. Yet this was seen as an exceedingly bad development not just for them, but everyone in Washington across the defense, security, intelligence and political establishment and in the boardrooms of those U.S. corporations who'd enjoyed massive profits during the crime/corporate-friendly Batista regime.

Thus was created the circumstances that would eventually lead to the Bay of Pigs invasion ([click link here](#) for an info-graphic and timeline), one of most ill-advised, ill-fated, ill-conceived, ill-managed adventure in U.S. history. A defining event of the Cold War to be sure, but also one of the CIA's biggest cock-ups that set the stage for the Cuban Missile Crisis and possibly Kennedy's assassination on Nov. 22, 1963.

The Bay of Pigs Blowback

Few foreign policy misadventures (those that became public knowledge at least), resulted in more immediate and vociferous response from the American public and international community, as did the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Even fewer ended in such obvious and enduring ignominy. If JFK had been enjoying the ride in Air Force One up until that point then, the “flight” became very bumpy with the Cuban “situation.”

JFK was so rattled by the Bay of Pigs experience, he threatened to “splinter the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it to the four winds.” CIA chief Allen Dulles and two of his senior CIA spook colleagues were eventually forced to hang up their trilby hats and trench-coats, a move that Dulles neither forgot nor forgave. The CIA, however, survived as an American institution that was synonymous with fighting the dreaded, so-called “Red Menace,” which – in the Western Hemisphere at least – was personified by Castro.

As for the Agency and its operatives who survived the purge, they never forgot Kennedy’s threat nor his perceived “betrayal” of the Bay of Pigs invaders when the mission went south.

So what exactly happened with the Bay of Pigs? In order to better grasp how it all came together – a phrase not entirely appropriate because when it really counted it all came spectacularly unstuck – some brief background is needed. The original plot was hatched during the Eisenhower administration under Dulles’s direction and in concert with his big brother, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, the archetypal Cold Warrior, a man for whom leaders like Castro were anathema.

It involved utilizing the support of Cuban exiles, all of whom were mightily chagrined at the new Cuban leader. If anything the Cuban exiles hated Castro more than the Americans did, and were eager to bed down with anyone who’d help restore them to their former glory.

A ‘Perfect Failure’

The truly ironic thing is that the Americans at one point did have opportunities to bring Castro inside the tent before the Soviets did. Despite the fact he’d expropriated the property of some U.S. corporations (including that of the ubiquitous, notorious United Fruit Company of Guatemalan coup fame and the poster child of rapacious, exploitative U.S. corporate fuelled neo-colonialism), he denied being a communist.

Nor were there any signs the as-yet-non-aligned Castro intended to bunk down with the Soviets. On his visit to America in April 1960, Eisenhower refused to

even meet with the new leader, despite the fact the U.S. had formally recognized his new government. The sub-text of the Americans' response might as well have been: "If we can't own, pillage, plunder and exploit your country and bleed it dry, we don't wanna know about you. Adios Amigo!"

Whether Fidel might've responded positively to any American overtures is now somewhat academic. But the truth is that no one will ever know. One thing we do know was that when the Americans "passed" on Cuba and ratcheted up the hostility, the Soviets didn't miss a beat. and were "in like Flynn"! The rest as they say, is history, most of it as we'll see, *not so good!* And so the stage was set for the Bay of Pigs.

Aptly described by Peter Kornbluh as *the "perfect failure,"* the Bay of Pigs was a disastrous mix of own goals, "mission myopia," cock-ups and unalloyed hubris. The plan was so ill conceived that even the normally gung-ho Joint Chiefs of Staff knew it was bound to fail or had serious doubts. There are varying accounts as to whether they properly conveyed this to JFK, or there was some genuine misunderstanding.

But the reality was that the Chiefs had their own agenda – then as now, a not unfamiliar phenomenon in the annals of interagency rivalry within the US military, foreign policy and national security establishment. They wanted a full-scale invasion and knew JFK was not up for that under any circumstances.

Yet in effectively "nodding" a mission they knew had little or no chance of success, they calculated that Kennedy's hand would be forced politically when that failure became obvious; the JCOS brass would then get their Big Day after all. From there they could claim bragging rights as the guys who came in and cleaned up the CIA's mess, and Kennedy would cop all the flak for approving this "it seemed like a good idea at the time" operation.

It's uncertain how the Chiefs were going to explain to Kennedy himself *after the fact* why they did not actively discourage the mission, or whether indeed they even gave this much consideration. It's possible they short-changed JFK's ability to "smell the rat" (that effectively he was set up by the CIA and the Chiefs), or figured that he would be so grateful to them later on when they had in fact cleaned up the mess he'd forgive and forget their treachery.

As it turned out, JFK did detect the "odor of rodent" before the mission was finally aborted. In order to minimize the failure, Kennedy refused to approve the necessary extra air cover that everyone was clamoring for, and that they insisted would snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Kennedy didn't buy this, and, once the penny dropped, seemingly preferred to cut his losses there and then.

From there on, collectively the brass was *persona non grata* with JFK, as he simply deduced he could no longer trust them. Much to their chagrin, they didn't get their "boots-on-the-ground" gig as hoped. To underscore how unsettled the JCOS were about this, around 18 months later at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the then U.S. Air Force General Curtis ("Bombsaway") Le May along with his JCOS colleagues began foaming at the mouth and literally wanted to nuke the Soviets *and* the Cubans back to the Neolithic Era. That Kennedy prevailed over this pressure is a matter of history of course; the fact we're all still here talking about it is some testament to that.

Lock 'n Load

As for the invasion however, with some modification to the original plan, in early April 1961, JFK gave the CIA and the exiled "Cubanistas" – who by this time had foam coming out of *their* mouths – the go-ahead. Presumably this was partly because he had a measure of respect for Allen Dulles and his judgment. While this was Dulles's (and Eisenhower's) baby, JFK accepted the parentage.

In preparation for the invasion, equipment, supplies and materiel were parachuted into the designated invasion location earlier with planes piloted by Cuban exiles accompanied by CIA mercenaries. However as luck would have it, much of this logistical support was lost in the swamp close by. Moreover, a *pre*-invasion air support strike was supposed to soften up the Cubans, break their morale, and destroy or render inactive most of the Cuban Air Force. As it turned out, the attack destroyed only a handful of planes, with a number of civilians ending up as collateral damage.

The decision not to follow-up with additional air support left the invaders with their "paramilitary peckers" swinging in the Bay of Pigs' sea breeze, so to speak. They quickly ran out of – or were unable to locate – their supplies. Over the next three days, there was intense fighting between the two forces; but before it even started really, it was all over for the counter-revolutionary wannabes.

Amazingly, before the invasion, the CIA was apparently tipped off by the Soviets – presumably because they wanted to give the Americans pause about any aggressive military ambitions – that Castro was aware of a possible attack and/or invasion. For his part though Castro apparently expected that any such operation would be a full-scale military campaign, not the piddling bunch of deluded, right-wing, rag-tag, rabble-rousing soldiers of misfortune that eventually did do so.

Incredibly, the CIA folk adopted a "need to know" response to *this* critical piece of information and omitted to tell JFK when there was still ample

opportunity, possibly explaining why the normally unflappable president went ballistic later. It's difficult to see how Kennedy would've green-lighted the operation had he been "in the know" on this. In anticipation of such an invasion, the preternaturally charismatic Fidel mobilized all his armed forces and rallied for moral support any and all Cuban nationals who could hold a pitchfork or machete and see over the steering wheels of their Ford convertibles and Chevy pickups.

A Cult Following

The Bay of Pigs invaders eventually were outgunned, outnumbered, out-maneuvered and out-smarted. Having nowhere else to go, the "paramilitaries" high-tailed back to the beaches of the Bay of Pigs. Those that weren't killed, either surrendered or were captured, with some later executed.

There are some further observations about the Bay of Pigs "fiasco" (as JFK aptly defined it) to note. Before the invasion the Cuban revolution was, by some accounts, running out of puff. Either way, after the botched invasion and the resulting worldwide publicity, it was *unstoppable*.

The location of the Soviet missiles in Cuba in October the next year – the decision taken as a direct consequence of the fallout from the Bay of Pigs to discourage any further thoughts of regime change – was the most provocative, potentially consequential acts in history.

As for JFK, he was both devastated by the failure and humiliated by the fallout of the mission. Given this was a man unaccustomed to failure, it must have been a heavy cross to bear. He'd however get an opportunity to redeem himself with the Cuban Missile Crisis, but his legacy was forever stained. As for the CIA, its senior executives got to understand the meaning of "blowback."

Interestingly, one of the reasons why the Bay of Pigs operation was unsuccessful was much the same as why the Iraq invasion in 2003 was an unmitigated disaster: like those involved in, and who supported, *that* monumental foreign policy miscalculation by the U.S., they believed the Cuban people would be grateful for being liberated from Fidel's tyranny and rise up in arms against the oppressors. Of course, history tells a different story.

A Historic Moment

The events surrounding Castro and Cuba also resonate throughout the enduring mystery of Kennedy's assassination, whether the Official Story of Lee Harvey Oswald and his involvement in the "Fair Play for Cuba Committee" or the Unofficial Story that Kennedy was killed as payback for abandoning the Cuban exiles (and friends of the Mafia) at the Bay of Pigs and his retaliation against

the CIA.

No other foreign country comes remotely close to having any more connections to the momentous Kennedy assassination than does Cuba. For this reason alone, Cuba – and by extrapolation Fidel Castro – will feature large in any future historical narrative.

That said – love him or hate him – Castro's place in history is guaranteed, much more so I suspect than most of his critics and enemies, past and present, most of whom are likely to end up as mere footnotes by comparison.

And as we have seen some many times throughout the American Cold War narrative, every fringe-dwelling, Marxist/Leninist and/or AK-47 packing, left-wing-leaning revolutionary wannabee in Latin America will pull out all stops to see if he or she might emulate Castro's David and Goliath feat and kick the "gringos" where it really hurts.

That none has so far fared as well as Castro is a matter of history. Indeed, we might say this "standing up to the Man" was Castro's most singular achievement. Even now, in the post-Castro era, Cuba itself will always remain an historically ineradicable symbol of fervent resistance to – and overt defiance of – Uncle Sam's unerring, recidivistic predisposition for pillage and plunder in other people's backyards.

For years, the CIA expended more time, money, ingenuity and energy in trying to "off" Fidel than they have in trying to "off" all of the other heads of state together that they've ever had in their sights for over 60 years. They cooked up all manner of outrageous, cockamamie Spy v Spy schemes such as placing small exploding devices in his cigars; administering exotic bacteria, viruses or toxic poisons by a multitude of means and methods; and giving him LSD in public so he'd flip out and lose face.

They even considered using *non-discernible microbionoculators* (lethal darts with undetectable poison fired from a high-powered gun), to all manner of bizarre plots and schemes such as administering chemicals to make the *Comandante's* facial hair fall out.

The fact then that Castro still saw off 10 U.S. presidents is a remarkable feat unto itself. His success at survival made the celebrations in Little Havana in Miami, Florida, at the news of his death at age 90 seem pathetic and silly. While the anti-Castro Cubans may have been grinning from ear to ear and jumping for joy, it seems safe to say "Fiddy" had the last laugh on both his enemies in Miami and the Werewolves of Washington.

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Why Gen. Mattis Is No Gen. Marshall

President-elect Trump's pick of retired Gen. James "Mad Dog" Mattis to run the Pentagon raises questions about civilian control of the military, especially compared to the precedent of Gen. George Marshall, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Useful perspective on issues surrounding the nomination of the retired Marine Corps general James Mattis to be Secretary of Defense, including the issue of civilian control of the military, can come from reflecting on the career of the one other general ever to be U.S. Defense Secretary.

Whether the appointment of Mattis turns out to be good or bad will depend as well on other things, but for comparison and context, consider the role and talents of the third Secretary of Defense, George C. Marshall. (After World War II, a reorganization transformed the Department of War, which had existed since 1789, into the Department of Defense.)

Marshall had a career as an Army officer but, apart from 18 months as a second lieutenant of infantry during the insurgency in the Philippines that followed the Spanish-American War, he rose to five-star general without ever commanding troops in combat. He instead was a brilliant planner and organizer.

During World War I, he was a staff officer who was heavily involved in the planning of operations for the American Expeditionary Force. As Army chief of staff throughout World War II, Marshall could be said to have managed the enormous allied war effort as much as any one person did. This was one of two roles that earned him a distinguished place in history.

His other big role was as a post-war diplomat, beginning when President Harry Truman dispatched him to China to try to arrange a political settlement between the Chinese Nationalists and Communists. He served as Truman's Secretary of State during the critical years of the beginning of the Cold War, from 1947 to 1949. It was during his tenure in that office that he led implementation of the economic recovery program that bears his name – work for which he would receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953.

A World-Class Diplomat

Marshall's service as Defense Secretary (following a stint as president of the American National Red Cross) thus came after he had already been one of the most prominent members of the Truman administration and a diplomat of world-class stature and accomplishment.

Truman's calling of Marshall back to his administration to be Secretary of Defense was a short-term (Marshall served in the position for only a year) fix to a problem of bad morale and organization in the U.S. military establishment. The job of Secretary of Defense, which had been established in 1947, had not yet enjoyed a leader who would set a strong and positive model for future occupants of the office.

Truman removed each of his first two secretaries of defense (James Forrestal and Louis Johnson) after just a year and a half in the job. Marshall took the position at the low point of September 1950, after three months of the United States reeling from the North Korean invasion that began the Korean War.

As secretary, Marshall was involved in one of the best-known assertions of civilian control of the military: Truman's firing of an insubordinate Douglas MacArthur, an action in which Marshall concurred. With that personnel problem resolved and the tide turned in Korea, Marshall retired to private life in September 1951.

In short, Marshall is not a precedent for the Mattis appointment except in the technical sense of having once worn stars on his shoulders. Putting Mattis in the job really would be a departure, in that he is at short remove from being a warrior and has had nothing like the career that Marshall had when he took over leadership of the Pentagon.

It is with good reason that the high school in Fairfax County, Virginia that is named after Marshall calls its athletic teams the Statesmen.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of *Why America Misunderstands the World*. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)
