

The Bay of Pigs Invasion of 1961

The Bay of Pigs invasion was a valiant, but unsuccessful attempt by U.S.-backed Cuban exiles to overthrow Cuba's Communist government in April 1961. The ultimate goal of the plan was to overthrow Cuban dictator Fidel Castro and establish a non-communist government on the island. The exiles, known as Brigade 2506, were trained and funded by the United States government.

Within six months of Castro's overthrow of Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship in Cuba in January 1959, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba. Prior to that, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had been training Cuban exiles for a possible invasion of Cuba. The invasion plan was approved in February 1961, by President John F. Kennedy, Eisenhower's successor.

On April 17, 1961, approximately 1,500 Cuban exile forces armed with U.S. weapons landed at Playa Girón and Playa Larga, two beaches on Cuba's southern coast near the Bay of Pigs (Bahía de Cochinos). The exiles planned to advance into Cuban territory, rally anti-Castro support from other Cubans, overthrow Castro's regime, and establish a provisional government in Cuba. However, the area around the landing sites was swampy, which made it difficult for them to establish a beachhead and move into the countryside. The exiles were also heavily outnumbered by Castro's army. Castro's air force also strafed the exiles, sank two of their escort ships, and destroyed much of their air support. The exiles further suffered from a lack of ammunition, food, and water.

The invasion ended on April 19, 1961 after more than 1,100 members of Brigade 2506 were captured. More than 100 Brigade members died in battle, and some others escaped to the interior of the island to join anti-Castro guerrilla groups. Castro's government has never revealed exactly how many Cuban troops died in the invasion. The defeat of the exile forces led to a widespread crackdown on political opponents of Cuba's government and solidified Castro's absolute control of the country.

The brigade prisoners remained in Castro's jails for 20 months. During this time, the United States negotiated with Cuba to secure their release. In December 1962, the Cuban government freed approximately 1,100 exiles in return for \$53 million in food and medicines raised by private donations in the U.S. On December 23, 1962, a plane containing the first group of freed prisoners landed in the United States. A week later, on Saturday, December 29, 1962, surviving Brigade members gathered for a ceremony in Miami's Orange Bowl, where the Brigade's flag was handed over to President Kennedy. "I can assure you," the president promised, "that this flag will be returned to this brigade in a free Havana."

Experts have put forth a number of explanations for the mission's failure, including poor planning and the U.S. government's failure to provide air support for the exiles. Before the attack, the U.S. media had reported information about Cuban exile training camps in Guatemala, thus compromising the secrecy of the operation. In addition, just two days prior to the invasion, exile pilots flying WWII era bomber planes provided by the U.S.

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had failed in an attempt to destroy the Cuban Air Force. President Kennedy cancelled a second air strike. Castro's government also had arrested many of its opponents in Cuba so that they would not be able to join the attack, and Cuban troops greatly outnumbered the exiles. The invasion is regarded as one of the worst foreign policy blunders of U.S. President John F. Kennedy's administration.

April 17, 2011 marked the 50th anniversary of the Bay of Pigs invasion and the heroic but unsuccessful efforts of Brigade 2506 to overthrow Cuba's Communist regime. The Bay of Pigs Museum & Library located at 1821 Southwest 9th Street, Miami, Florida, honors the veterans of Brigade 2506.

Adapted from the following sources:

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