

Kennedy and the Cold Warriors:

The Case for a “Big” Conspiracy

by **Tim Howells**

Introduction

In Oliver Stone’s fictionalized movie JFK, “Mr. X” outlines the full dimensions of the conspiracy behind the Kennedy assassination. A conspiracy that reached, he says, into the highest levels of our military and intelligence communities: A conspiracy that in fact constitutes a “secret team” within our own government, exercising tremendous power and escaping all democratic controls. For years many of us resisted this kind of “big” conspiracy theory. Surely such contempt for our constitution and democratic traditions, and for human life itself, could at most be limited to a small group of “rogue” operatives acting without authority. Over the decades since the assassination, thanks to the Freedom of Information Act and the dedicated efforts of some fine historians and researchers, a detailed and well documented history of the Kennedy years and the Cold War in general has emerged that is darker and more alarming than any work of fiction. There is no reason now to rule out the “big” conspiracy theory, and there is much to support it. The complex and bitter struggles between president Kennedy and the militarists have been extensively documented in regards to the Bay of Pigs fiasco,¹ the Cuban Missile Crisis,² and American policy in Vietnam.^{3,4} An important new piece of the puzzle surrounding the President’s assassination has been provided in James Bamford’s new book, “Body of Secrets.”⁵ This describes for the first time a series of proposals put forward first by president Eisenhower at the end of his final term, and then in 1962 and 1963 by our four most senior military commanders, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all holdovers from the Eisenhower administration. The aim of these proposals, codenamed “Operation Northwoods,” was to provide a pretext for



an overt invasion of Cuba by the United States. The common thread was the idea of framing the Castro regime or pro-Castro activists for atrocities actually committed by the US government against US citizens, often on American soil. Importantly, Bamford further documents the routine dismissal of these outrageous proposals by the Kennedy administration, and the growing feelings of frustration, anger and impotence expressed by our highest military leaders in the leadup to the assassination.

The proposals to frame Castro supporters for atrocities committed against the US will sound all too familiar to anyone who has looked into the Kennedy assassination and the subsequent coverup. Many if not most of those who have studied the assassination have come to believe that the murder plot grew out of the CIA/Mafia plots to assassinate Castro and that it was orchestrated by veteran CIA officers who were involved in both the Castro assassination plots and the Bay of Pigs fiasco.^{6,7} The original idea for the coverup was to implicate Oswald as the President’s assassin. The purported involvement of an operative with high profile involvement in pro-Castro activities could have then been used to blame the assassination on Castro himself and to justify an invasion of Cuba in retaliation. I will look at related anticommunist operations codenamed “Gladio” being conducted by the CIA and NATO in Europe during this period. These also involved assassination and terrorism, and resulted in the deaths of hundreds of innocent people.

In regards to the Kennedy assassination, the Northwoods and Gladio material can only provide historical context and not hard evidence linking the perpetrators to the deed. However, it’s essential for anyone interested in the assassination to understand this massive and systematic use of terrorism and assassination by covert agencies operating within all western governments including our own. The assassination of

president Kennedy fits into this pattern of carefully calculated violence like the keystone of an arch.

From the Bay of Pigs to The Northwoods Conspiracies

The most urgent foreign policy issue greeting John F. Kennedy when he took office in January 1961 was the question of what to do about Castro's communist regime in Cuba. Normally in the transition to a new administration a difficult issue like this would be put on hold to allow the incoming president to establish his own policy. In this case, however, Eisenhower felt that the issue was too urgent and the new administration too untrustworthy to wait. The plans for a US backed invasion by Cuban exile forces were already well advanced when Kennedy took office. Even more significantly, Eisenhower, just two weeks before Kennedy's inauguration was desperately seeking a pretext for an overt military invasion of the island.

On January 3 he [Eisenhower] told [General Lyman] Lemnitzer and other aides in his Cabinet Room that he would move against Castro before the inauguration if only the Cubans gave him a really good excuse. Then, with time growing short, Eisenhower floated an idea. If Castro failed to provide that excuse, perhaps, he said, the United States "could think of manufacturing something that would be generally acceptable." What he was suggesting was a pretext — a bombing, an attack, an act of sabotage — carried out secretly against the United States by the United States. Its purpose would be to justify the launching of a war.⁸

The fact that President Eisenhower was proposing acts of sabotage and a covert disinformation campaign aimed against his own government is highly significant for a number of reasons. This shows that this mentality was by no means limited to a lunatic fringe inside the Pentagon and the CIA. No one carried more authority in these circles or was better qualified to represent the consensus thinking of the Cold Warriors than Dwight D. Eisenhower. As President, Eisenhower did not need to resort to subterfuge. Since he believed that the Castro regime represented a threat to the security of the United States, he could have authorized action

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against Cuba and asked the American people and their elected representatives in congress for their support. We can only conclude that the President and his advisors lacked confidence in the democratic institutions they were sworn to uphold. Clearly these men firmly believed that the war against communism was too important to be entrusted to the democratically elected government of the United States. Extraordinary measures were justified to save the American people from themselves.

Of course, no invasion of Cuba by US forces was ever authorized. However, The US backed exile invasion eventually went ahead with the approval of President Kennedy, and became infamous as the "Bay of Pigs" fiasco. Kennedy was sold on the idea by Allen Dulles and Richard Bissell of the CIA on the basis that the role of the US would be strictly covert and deniable. They claimed that the arrival of the invasion force would spark a massive uprising against the Castro regime on the island. This appealed to Kennedy's thinking regarding "counter-insurgency" which he had articulated as a senator and which he adhered to throughout his brief but eventful administration. Kennedy's theme was that we should give as much support as possible to indigenous anticommunist movements, but that we should avoid the trap of trying to enforce our will on these complex situations through military intervention. The CIA's own internal investigation of the Bay of Pigs invasion found that there was no basis whatsoever for Dulles' and Bissell's claims that there would be an uprising:

We can confidently assert that the Agency had no intelligence evidence that the Cubans in significant numbers could or would join the invaders or that there was any kind of an effective and cohesive resistance movement under anybody's control,

let alone the Agency's, that could have furnished internal leadership for an uprising in support of the invasion.⁹

Rather than provide the president with accurate intelligence on which he could base a decision, Dulles and Bissell fabricated false information carefully crafted to appeal to his philosophy and personality. The only possible explanation seems to be that they believed that once the invasion was underway Kennedy would be so deeply committed that there would be no way he could allow it to fail. Effectively, Dulles and Bissell were using disinformation techniques to undermine their own government. This opinion is strengthened by the fact that just one week before the invasion Bissell was warned by his two top military experts, Jake Esterline and Jack Hawkins, that it had no chance of success and should be canceled. Bissell had to twist arms and give them false assurances to prevent them from resigning. To quote Esterline:

"I am forced to a very unhappy conclusion and that is that he [Bissell] was lying up and lying down for reasons I don't yet totally understand. I am convinced of this right now. I think that someone would deliberately misrepresent something like this to the ultimate head of state, that's pretty unforgivable, I think"¹⁰

Kennedy stuck to his principles when the Bay of Pigs invasion failed, and refused to commit US forces to save the invasion. General Lemnitzer, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described his inaction as "almost criminal."¹¹ The president on the other hand felt badly let down and misled by his top military and intelligence advisers. After the Bay of Pigs Kennedy reviewed the advice he received from the Pentagon and the CIA with the utmost skepticism, and he tended to go his own way. Rather than commit armed forces in Laos Kennedy accepted a negotiated solution, and a neutralist government. Former President Eisenhower condemned this as reminding him of how China had been lost. Admiral Burke of the Joint Chiefs complained that "each time you give ground, it is harder to stand next time."¹² When faced with the threat of nuclear warheads in Cuba, Kennedy again rejected calls for an invasion, and found a negotiated solution. Air

Force Chief of Staff, General LeMay branded this "almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich."¹³ The mounting frustration and desperation of the militarists under the Kennedy administration was reflected in the "Northwoods" proposals which were aggressively promoted by the Joint Chiefs in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Dozens of plans were proposed to frame the Cuban government and their supporters for attacks on US military targets and on civilians. These included faking attacks on the Guantanamo base, on civilian aircraft flying over Cuba, and also staging attacks in the US itself:

"We could develop a Communist Cuban terror campaign in the Miami area, in other Florida cities and even in Washington."¹⁴

The Joint Chiefs, our highest and most respected military commanders, even made it clear that the cold blooded mass murder of US citizens should not be considered an impediment, and in fact could be highly beneficial:

"We could blow up a U.S. ship in Guantanamo Bay and blame Cuba," they proposed; "casualty lists in U.S. newspapers would cause a helpful wave of national indignation."¹⁵

Bamford describes Lemnitzer as "in the clinical sense, paranoid,"¹⁶ and as having "quietly slipped over the edge."¹⁷ From our perspective of course this is true, and it would also have been true from the standpoint of most Americans in 1963. However, it is important to keep in mind that the basic idea behind these proposals originated with president Eisenhower, and they seemed in no way aberrant to Lemnitzer's associates in the upper echelons of the military and intelligence communities. In fact the only really startling thing about the Northwoods proposals is that they were aimed against US citizens and would have been conducted on US soil. We have known for years that very similar proposals were not only put forward but were actually carried out in Europe under the auspices of NATO and the CIA. This terrorist campaign has profoundly affected political and social life in Europe since the beginning of the Cold War.

Gladio, Assassination Plots, and the Strategy of Tension

The operations codenamed Gladio got started at the end of World War Two. Fearing that the withdrawal of Allied forces from Europe would lead to a Soviet invasion, the OSS and Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) sponsored the formation of “stay behind” units. These were paramilitary organizations which, it was hoped, could provide initial resistance to any Soviet advances until the national armies could be mobilized. The godfather of this plan was Allen Dulles,¹⁸ the legendary OSS officer who became the first head of the CIA and who later was the most active member of the Warren Commission. When SHAPE became NATO, one requirement for a country to gain membership in NATO was the establishment of such a “stay behind” unit under NATO’s authority.¹⁹

The Soviet advance against the NATO alliance never materialized, and as the Cold War took shape these covert paramilitary units operating throughout Western Europe turned their attention to the problem of preventing Communists from gaining power through normal political channels. The Italian units were particularly well organized and effective because of the strong alliances forged between Allied intelligence and the Italian secret services and also the Mafia during the end of World War Two. The Italian organization became even more active and violent when William Harvey was made head of the CIA station in Rome in February 1963.

In 1960, before Kennedy took office, William Harvey had been appointed by Richard Bissell to run ZR/RIFLE, the CIA’s program that handled the problem of assassinating foreign leaders. It was in this capacity, in September 1950, that Harvey recruited Mafia bosses Johnny Rosselli, Sam Giancana and Santo Trafficante to assist in the assassination attempts on Fidel Castro. The Kennedy administration was not informed of these plans until May of 1962, when the CIA was forced to brief Robert Kennedy on the plots in order to stop a Justice Department investigation of Sam Giancana. Robert Kennedy was furious and demanded that the plots be halted immediately. He was assured that the plots had already been stopped, but this was untrue. In fact they were still active, and Harvey continued them until February 1963 in defiance of the Attorney General’s direct orders.²⁰ At that point, after yet another row with Robert Kennedy, Harvey was removed as head of the Cuban covert action unit (Task Force W), and the Agency reassigned him to Rome.

Once installed in Rome Harvey promptly began accelerating the Gladio operations.

According to CIA files found in Rome in 1984, CIA station chief William Harvey began to recruit action teams based on a list of 2,000 men capable of throwing bombs, conducting attacks, and accompanying these actions with indispensable propaganda. These teams had a chance to practice their skills in 1963 as part of an anti-union offensive. U.S.-trained gladiators dressed as police and civilians attacked construction workers peacefully demonstrating in Rome, leaving some 200 wounded and a large section of the city in shambles.²¹

Through the 1960s and 1970s Gladio operations grew in scale and sophistication. The terrorism culminated in a series of bombings throughout Italy starting in 1969 and continuing until 1984. Hundreds of innocent people were killed, including 85 in a single bomb attack at the Bologna train station. Often these attacks were staged to appear to have been committed by communist activists; the Bologna attack is one such case. This appears to match the pattern of the Northwoods proposals and the Kennedy assassination. In addition to funding the right wing terrorists, the CIA took to funding the worst left wing extremists as well, including the notorious Red Brigades. Arthur Rowse among others has pointed out that the assassination of Prime Minister Aldo Moro in 1978, although carried out by the Red Brigades, was almost certainly a Gladio operation. Rowse presents detailed evidence linking the kidnapping and murder of Moro to the Hyperion language school in Paris, a CIA front that funneled money to the Red Brigades, and also to the SID, the Italian intelligence agency that organized Gladio operations. Aldo Moro had recently engineered the “Historic Compromise” that would have allowed communist participation in the Italian government - a move aimed at easing political tensions. He had received dire warnings from Henry Kissinger and other NATO officials that he must change his policies or face severe consequences shortly before he was kidnapped and murdered.²²

The philosophy behind this funding of terrorism from both the extreme right and the extreme left became known as the “strategy of tension.” The idea

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was to keep the public so fearful and intimidated that they would accept authoritarian restrictions on their freedoms and democratic rights. This strengthened the center-right parties at the expense of all others, effectively marginalizing the communists and the political left. In this context the worst possible threat in the eyes of the CIA, was a leader like Aldo Moro who was capable of building stable coalitions that included the political left with the aim of reducing political tensions. Clearly John F. Kennedy was a leader in the same mold, and was even a much greater threat to the Agency’s plans. In the words of the notorious CIA officer E. Howard Hunt:

Under the [Kennedy] administration’s philosophy, the real enemy became poverty and ignorance; any talk of an international Communist conspiracy was loudly derided. Détente and a positive approach to easing international tensions filled the Washington air, to the wonderment of those of us who still remembered Budapest, the Berlin Wall, and the fate of Brigade 2506 [at the Bay of Pigs].²³

Note that Hunt considers “a positive approach to easing international tensions” to be a *bad* thing, and confidently expects his readers to agree. Again, from our perspective it is tempting to write Hunt off as a deranged individual, but in the circles he moved in there was nothing aberrant about these views. In fact the “strategy of tension” philosophy and the commitment to terrorism and the assassination of insufficiently anticommunist leaders had become fully accepted on both sides of the Atlantic.

In 1990 the European Parliament published a joint resolution condemning Gladio, referring to it as “a clandestine parallel intelligence and armed operations organization in several Member States of the Com-

munity.” They further noted that “for over 40 years this organization has escaped all democratic controls and has been run by the secret services of the states concerned in collaboration with NATO.” They expressed special concern about “the assumption by certain US military personnel at SHAPE and in NATO of the right to encourage the establishment in Europe of a clandestine intelligence and operation network.”²⁵ Unfortunately, not only has the United States government made no such acknowledgment of this problem, but Gladio has received hardly a mention, if in fact any mention at all, in the mainstream media in the United States. Again, the parallels with the Kennedy assassination are obvious.

Conclusions

The increasingly rich documentation of the Cold War and the Kennedy administration has revealed a pattern of right wing conspiracies in Europe and the United States that utilized terrorism and assassination on a shockingly routine basis in the battle against Communism. These were not isolated “rogue” operations, but carefully coordinated operations carried out with the very highest authority from within the Pentagon. In 1962 the Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed a variety of plots to commit atrocities against US citizens in such a way that the blame could be placed on the Castro regime or on pro-Castro activists. The aim was to provide a pretext for an invasion of Cuba by the United States. These plots could easily have become the prototype for the Kennedy assassination itself, with Oswald playing the role of the pro-Castro patsy.

Given what we know now, I see no reason to shy away from the theory that President Kennedy was the victim of a “big” conspiracy coordinated from the highest level of our military establishments.

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