

Option B: Twentieth century topic

2 Who was to blame for the Bay of Pigs disaster?

Study the Background Information and the sources carefully, and then answer **all** parts of Question 2.

Background Information

In 1959, Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba by armed revolution. The US government was extremely concerned about this due to Castro's close links with the USSR. President Eisenhower authorised a CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) plan for Cuban exiles to invade Cuba and overthrow Castro. When Kennedy became President in January 1961, he went ahead with the invasion plan. The attempted invasion took place in April and was a terrible failure, with most of the invaders having to surrender.

Kennedy blamed the CIA for the disaster, while the CIA blamed him. Historians have also identified accidents and bad luck, as well as the strength of Castro's forces, as possible causes.

How far was Kennedy responsible for the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion?

SOURCE A

The landing point chosen by the CIA for the invasion was not a good one – the Bay of Pigs was a swampy area on Cuba's southern coast. News of the plan became common knowledge among Cuban exiles in Miami. Castro learned about it as early as October 1960 and prepared to defend Cuba. Newspapers were even able to report on developments as they happened. Kennedy said to one of his officials, 'Castro doesn't need agents over here. All he has to do is read our newspapers.' The plan included two air strikes against Cuban air bases. For the first strike on 15 April the CIA used obsolete World War II bombers and painted them to look like Cuban air force planes. The bombers missed many of their targets including Cuban airfields, leaving most of Castro's air force intact. Photographs of the repainted planes and US support for the invasion became public. To try to hide US involvement, Kennedy quickly cancelled the second air strike, leaving the Cuban air force intact. Castro ordered 20 000 troops to where the invaders had landed. Cuban control of the skies enabled its air force to attack the invaders, sink two escort ships and destroy half of the air support. Weaknesses in CIA planning became more and more apparent. The exiles got bogged down in the swamp and within 24 hours of the attack 1 200 invaders were captured and more than 100 were killed. One of the first things Kennedy did after the disaster was to sack the CIA director.

From a recent history book.

SOURCE B

Kennedy was fatally attracted by the idea of overthrowing Castro at little cost. Here was a scheme whose success was guaranteed by the CIA. He let himself be talked into something which his instincts had warned him against. In early April 1961 US newspapers were reporting that the United States was training Cuban exiles for an invasion of Cuba. On 15 April 1961, eight bombers bombed three of Castro's airfields. After the raids Cuba was left with only eight planes and seven pilots. On 17 April, five merchant ships carrying 1 400 exiles headed for the Bay of Pigs. The CIA checked with Kennedy about the second air raid and Kennedy said he did not remember being told about a second raid and cancelled it. The CIA was shocked. Its officials knew that without air support the invasion would fail. Very quickly two of the invasion force's ships were sunk. On 21 April the CIA asked Kennedy for air support for the attackers who were trapped on the beach but Kennedy said he wanted 'minimum visibility'. It was all over. 67 Cuban exiles were killed and 1 197 were captured.

From a recent account of the Bay of Pigs.

"The Cuban People Have Not Yet Spoken Their Final Piece"

—President Kennedy



A cartoon published in an American newspaper, 21 April 1961.

SOURCE D

TOP SECRET

- 1 In evaluating the CIA's performance it is essential to avoid grasping at the explanation that the President's order cancelling the air strikes was the chief cause of failure.
- 2 If the invasion had been better conceived, better organised, better staffed and better managed, would the issue of air strikes have had to be presented for presidential decision at all?
- 3 It is essential to keep in mind the possibility that the invasion was doomed in advance, that a landing by 1 500 men would eventually have been crushed by Castro's military resources strengthened by Soviet Bloc military material.
- 4 The fundamental cause of the disaster was the CIA's failure to give the project appropriate organisation, staffing and full-time direction of the highest quality.

The findings of the Taylor Committee. On 22 April Kennedy asked General Maxwell Taylor to report on the failed Bay of Pigs operation. Robert Kennedy, the President's brother, was a member of the Committee. After the Committee had reported, Taylor was promoted by Robert Kennedy.

SOURCE E

Had the President been more concerned with a thorough investigation than with his image, he would have waited until all the troops had been accounted for; he would have eliminated his brother from the Committee; and he would have selected a group of 'statesmen' for the Committee. The report suffered from the haste in which it was prepared and the failure to interview a number of important witnesses. There can be no doubt that the CIA will continue to be blamed for the failure. This investigation shows that the major causes for the failure were the actions, or inactions, of the Kennedy Administration, including the President.

From a report by the CIA's official historian about the Taylor Committee investigation. It was written in 1984 but not released to the public until 2011.

SOURCE F

The president of a great democracy such as ours, owes a common obligation to the people: an obligation to present the facts, to present them truthfully.

On that unhappy island, the news has grown worse instead of better. I have emphasised before that this was a struggle of Cuban patriots against a Cuban dictator. We made it repeatedly clear that the armed forces of this country would not intervene in any way.

It is not the first time that communist tanks have rolled over brave men and women fighting to recover the independence of their homeland. Nor is it by any means the final episode in the eternal struggle of liberty against tyranny. It is clear that the forces of communism are not to be underestimated, in Cuba or anywhere else in the world. The advantages of a police state – its use of mass terror and arrests to prevent the spread of free dissent – cannot be overlooked by those who expect the fall of every fanatic tyrant.

From a speech by President Kennedy to a group of newspaper editors, 20 April 1961.