

Fidel Catastrophes

*The Castro Obsession: U.S. Covert Operations
Against Cuba, 1959-1965*

By Don Bohning

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By Max Holland

Don Bohning's new history of covert operations against the regime of Fidel Castro, is admirably conceived. Much of the literature about U.S. policy toward Cuba in the 1960s is segmented and, consequently, unbalanced. Authors interested in presidential and/or CIA debacles have focused on the ill-fated Bay of Pigs expedition, often to the exclusion of the rest of the story. Other writers, intent on showcasing John F. Kennedy's finest hour -- and one of the CIA's -- have concentrated on the Cuban missile crisis while attenuating the significance of what transpired before and after. Meanwhile, the anti-climactic coda to this sometimes comic story -- namely, U.S. policy following President Kennedy's assassination in November 1963 -- is seldom, if ever, written about. Bohning's first contribution is that he tries to tell the story whole, as it should be.

Bohning, a journalist, brings interesting credentials. He began covering Latin America for the Miami Herald in 1964, including the large Cuban community in South Florida. This is a great advantage because so much of the story is bound up with Cuban exiles. In 1962-63, the covert "station" in Miami (aka "JMwave") was the largest CIA outpost in the world, other than headquarters in Langley. According to Bohning, JMwave's budget ran as high as \$50 million (in 1960s dollars), The station controlled between 300 and 400 front companies at one time or another, and up to 15,000 Cubans were connected to the covert war at its height.

Some of Bohning's best insights come from interviews with several key CIA officers who worked at the operational level -- i.e., where airy concepts and neat plans met reality. The perspectives of Ted Shackley, the JMwave station chief from 1962 to 1965, and Sam Halpern, an operations officer at CIA headquarters who worked the Cuba account, make for a fascinating look at "Mongoose," a largely fruitless effort conducted from 1961 to 1962. It was the first and last covert operation overseen by an attorney general (Robert Kennedy), and probably the most ill-conceived clandestine operation ever until the Iran-contra folly some 25 years later.

Although Bohning is not the first author to track down Jake Esterline and Jack Hawkins, the CIA project chief and chief of the paramilitary staff respectively during the Bay of Pigs invasion, no one has made better use of their recollections. Their bitterness over a mission that was preordained to fail is palpable. If a person can ever be held

responsible for that debacle, it has to be Richard M. Bissell, the deputy director for plans in 1961. The doctrine of “plausible deniability” is not supposed to lead to a situation where a president is kept unaware of the consequences of his decisions. Yet, on the basis of his interviews with Esterline and Hawkins, Bohning makes a convincing case that Bissell lied up and down the chain of command, as if only he needed to know.

If Bohning’s history has a flaw, it is in his larger depiction of certain events. He gives short shrift to the primary reason why the Soviet Union implanted missiles in Cuba. Nikita Khrushchev could have turned Cuba into an island bristling with conventional weaponry if his main impulse was to foil Operation MONGOOSE and/or prevent another invasion (which Washington had no intention of mounting absent a good-size revolt). Instead, the Soviet premier sought to redress, in one swift and surreptitious deployment, a serious imbalance in the nuclear balance of terror. And since the subtext of Bohning’s book is intelligence-agency blunders, why not point out that the missile deployment represented a monumental intelligence failure on Havana’s part (not to mention Moscow’s)? Nothing before or since has put Castro’s revolution at such risk.

Bohning also shies away from some new interpretations he might have offered based on the evidence he presents. Since the mid-1970s, for example, it has been a cliché to speak of the Kennedys’ vendetta against Castro. But as new biographies and histories have shown, President Kennedy, while reckless in some aspects of his life, was anything but when it came to Cold War hot spots such as Berlin and Cuba. He consistently tried to defuse, if not avoid altogether, situations where the superpowers were pitted directly against one another. JFK cannot be absolved of responsibility for what was undertaken during his administration, but fixations do not seem to have been his style. “Europeans think we are slightly demented on the subject of Castro,” he commented, in a typically detached remark during the missile crisis.

The obsession with Castro that Bohning writes of radiated from Robert Kennedy, as one episode vividly illustrates. According to Bohning’s interview with a Cuban exile prominent in the CIA’s covert war, after the island had been quarantined, the attorney general personally advised the exile to provoke an incident that might spark a war. “[Y]ou Cubans, if you really want to help,” Kennedy reportedly said, “what you have to do is get yourself a boat and try to sink one of those Russian ships trying to break the blockade.”

At the time, of course, President Kennedy was doing everything in his power to enforce the quarantine without provoking a confrontation.

Make no mistake: Robert Kennedy was no Jack Kennedy.