

**Robert A. Lovett Oral History Interview – JFK#3, 09/14/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Robert A. Lovett

**Interviewer:** Dorothy Fosdick

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**Biographical Note**

Robert A. Lovett (1895-1986) was a member of the General Advisory Committee and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. This interview focuses on the failures in planning the Bay of Pigs invasion and the repercussions of the invasion's failure, among other topics.

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Robert A. Lovett– JFK #3

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Person Interviewed:     The Honorable Robert A. Lovett

Address of Interviewee:   59 Wall Street, New York City

Date:           September 14, 1964

Others Present:

Organization Interviewee Associated with:   Brown Brothers Harriman & Co.

Subject Matter Covered in Interview:

          Cuban Crises - Part One:   The Bay of Pigs

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Q. Mr. Lovett, let's now talk about Cuba. I think it is correct to say that the Cuban affair falls into two parts. First is the Bay of Pigs and, second, is the so-called Cuban missile crisis. I suggest that we begin with the Bay of Pigs. Perhaps you might give your impressions of the Cuban problem as you were aware of it around the time of the Bay of Pigs.

A. With respect to the Bay of Pigs portion of the Cuban crises, the information which I have will, I am afraid, not be of much help to you since I knew nothing whatsoever about the operation planned except the news available in the papers and rumors from Cuba which were passed on to friends and relatives in this country dealing with the recruitment and training of certain of the Cuban refugee groups.

However, for what it may be worth, I will give you my best recollection of the status of planning in the latter part of 1960 which was disclosed to the President's Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities during my membership. As nearly as I can recall the events, the basic idea seemed to be to use the Cuban refugees, who volunteered for such activities, as small guerrilla bands operating under the control of Cuban Refugee Committees but helped by CIA supplies, communications equipment and transportation. The idea was, in effect, to use against Castro the same general sort of infiltration which he used against Batista. The shoreline and general terrain of Eastern Cuba, in particular, made such adventures reasonably easy. The opportunity to embarrass the Castro regime through major sabotage efforts, as well as to lay the groundwork for a larger military uprising at a later date, seemed attractive.

When I resigned from the President's Board of Consultants on

Foreign Intelligence Activities at the end of 1960, there had been no disclosure, as far as I can recall, of any large scale operation along the lines of a major military invasion landing and the establishment of a beach head.

Q. When did you have some intimation that a major endeavor or operation might be brewing or on foot?

A. I believe the first suggestion in the form of a rumor that something was under way in connection with Cuba came from Cubans in this country indicating that members of their families or friends were associated with some fairly large Cuban military group. Because of my membership on the Board of an American company, which had been in Cuba for almost 40 years and was currently operating one of the large new enterprises eagerly sought by Cuba to diversify its economy, I knew we had had a number of extremely able engineers and a loyal Cuban working force in the Moa Bay area, as well as in Havana to the west. These people got word out to their friends in the United States. There was nothing definite about these stories as regards type of activity, dates or anything else. But, when the American press began to come out with a rash of stories, including pictures of the Cuban volunteers being trained by American drill instructors, it became apparent that whatever the enterprise was it was going to be the best advertised assault ever made. In fact, there was so much written about it that it began to look phony to the point of casting doubt on the good faith of the officials of the United States associated with such an enterprise.

As I recall it, it was about April 11th that the American press came out with more or less flat predictions of an invasion then being mounted from some unknown place (the place being clearly identifiable to those with any knowledge of the Gulf of Mexico and the politics of Central America as Guatemala.)

I remember being sufficiently alarmed at the various press

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accounts so that I talked at some length with the very able Chairman and President of the American corporation I referred to above and asked them what, if anything, they had heard. It turned out that they had been making available to the government all factual information they had and that the rumors were beginning to concern them, in part because of the indication it gave that their problem would be more severe in the future than in the past. Their judgment was that there was a great deal in the rumors and that some major program was under way and they were gloomy about the prospects of success unless the United States was either a direct participant in the enterprise or stood behind it as a guarantor against failure.

Q. As these newspaper reports came to your attention and indicated that an invasion was probably on the way, what was your reaction; what were your thoughts at that stage?

A. I think that my major feeling at that stage was one of considerable alarm because, as a result of some years of experience with the military, I knew that any actual invasion in force not only would require extensive preparation but would have to be solidly backed up to be successful. I feared that the idea of the Cuban populace meeting any small group with bottles of Bacardi rum, cigars and a hearty welcome was complete nonsense. Unless far greater preparations had been made for such an "uprising" than I had any reason to believe could have been made in the light of my past service on the President's Board of Consultants, the idea of an "invasion" seemed absolutely lunatic.

When the papers started to publish the actual date of expected landings, I had a definite feeling of living in a world suddenly gone completely haywire and I longed for an expression from some competent government official saying that there was no truth in such reports. I would have accepted anybody as a competent official at that time, - U.S. or Cuban.

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Finally, just a few days before the actual landing, you will recall that President Kennedy made a public statement in his news conference to the effect that the United States would have no part in a military enterprise such as that referred to in the papers and that no United States military would give help of any kind.

I recall very vividly meeting at lunch the next day with Langbourne Williams, Robert C. Hills, and the former manager of their Moa Bay plant, now in New York. I never saw a gloomier group when I met them at lunch in a private room at the Cloud Club. There seemed to me something appropriate in the meeting place as it was quite evident that all of us were - if you will forgive the comment - way up in the air. When I came in the room, Lang Williams looked at me and said "well, there goes the ball game." He went on to say that, if anybody has the faintest idea that any kind of an invasion will now be met by an uprising of resident Cubans, he is out of his head; that comment by the President ended any chance of unarmed Cubans rising against Castro in the face of the U. S. hands-off statement.

I believe this Presidential statement - which removed any hope of U.S. participation while the U. S. was, in reality, participating in a limited sense only but exercising control - was one of the fatal flaws in the whole enterprise, the first one being to undertake the affair at all if it were in breach of a treaty or in any way could bring dishonor on this country. If we were to take so considerable a part in the affair we should have insured its success. It seems to me that if the United States' vital interests demanded that some steps of this sort be taken, it should not have been beyond the ingenuity of trained governmental servants to help circumstances occur which would give us a better posture before we embarked on an enterprise with such manifest flaws in it.

Q. Certainly, it would seem that the hands-off statement by

President Kennedy was a mistake and, as things developed, the whole enterprise turned out to be the first of President Kennedy's major efforts that really went wrong. Perhaps you could comment on your general impressions of the enterprise - what went wrong and what was really missing here that caused what was, in effect, a disaster.

A. I have been trying to recall as accurately as I can the events and the rumors and the conclusions which were reached at that time by some of us who were following the situation because of some special reason or other. I think I must say in all honesty that the whole enterprise from beginning to end seems to me to be a shocking example of what not to do, as well as how not to do it. I think it was one of the worst disasters - not necessarily in scale but in the completeness of its failure - of anything that I can recall as a U.S. para-military venture. To try to be responsive to your question, I must say that I think the attempt to disassociate the United States from an enterprise early and publicly charged to it by its own press and documented by pictures was maladroit, to say the least. There have been so many self-serving declarations - either in the form of books or statements - issued by those immediately involved in varying degrees, that I do not believe it would be useful to add to the confusion by making a guess from the outside as to what happened behind the scenes. I suspect, however, that in the dirty business of this type of sabotage, infiltration, guerrilla warfare and so on, there was a vain hope to insulate the United States government from management responsibility on the theory that this might help in preserving the doctrine of plausible denial - a valid and useful doctrine in intelligence and counter-intelligence activity but wholly inapplicable here.

In this case, obviously it was impossible and it should have been recognized as an absurdity in the light of the fact that an

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amphibious landing needs not only a considerable number of vessels - some very specialized ones, including landing barges - but also a supporting force with the characteristics of naval vessels. Obviously, a group of resident refugees from Cuba in this country could have neither the financial means nor the territorial area to permit the accumulation of this type of equipment from their own resources. There was an air of unreality about the whole planning stage which, I think, brings me to a frank criticism I must make in answer to your question.

The enterprise, from the start, seems to me to have been heavily colored by emotionalism and ignorance of techniques on the one hand and by a belief that activities such as these required only a high intelligence quotient in the individual planner or group of planners. Nothing could be further from the truth as the events showed. This was, basically, a military enterprise and it should not have been undertaken, in my opinion, by the CIA, or a White House group, or anybody other than a man trained to evaluate the risks and aware of the necessity of sticking to a schedule and to commitments of troops both on the attack, on the reenforcement, and on the logistics train necessary to support the enterprise. The idea of being able to hide such an affair in these circumstances seems to me to be just plain silly.

Another fatal flaw in the enterprise arose, I believe, as a result of the belief in certain quarters that the CIA was, in some fashion, possessed of reliable information which would justify a landing party in believing that it would receive a welcome. The "missionary complex", or a type of euphoria, is frequently found in reports from CIA agents in a given country and often leads to over-optimism. It is, in fact, one of the dangers that must be screened out carefully before acting on any CIA field report.

I cannot feel that the President was well served by his close advisers and the members of his staff to whom he turned for advice in this

matter. I believe he should have been forewarned of both the military difficulties in trying "to keep the U.S. out of it" and the consequences of any comments he or his agents in the U.N. might make in press conferences or in speeches.

After the Bay of Pigs, as we will both recall, there was violent criticism and the President ordered an investigation of the affair. He set up a Board of Inquiry which was under the Chairmanship of General Maxwell Taylor and included such people as CIA Director Allen Dulles, the Attorney General Robert Kennedy and, as I remember, Admiral Burke, a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Were you called at this time? Were your views requested? It is my impression that you made an appearance before this committee.

A. Yes, I was called before this Board of Inquiry and I did testify at some length. A good bit of my testimony, given under the somewhat embarrassing set-up of having the head of the CIA, as well as one of the senior members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, present to listen to possible criticism of their activities, was directed to the CIA aspects of the affair since the investigation dealt not only with the CIA planning but also with the CIA operation itself.

One of the principal lines of questioning, in my case, dealt with a report written by a panel, consisting of David Bruce and myself, in 1956 when we were both on the President's Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities and were asked to investigate an almost similar incident which occurred in Indonesia. You may recall that there had been high hopes that the Indonesians would rise and support what were considered the cause of peace, justice, etc., but they failed to do so and it was a dismal failure, including the shooting down and ultimate capture of an American citizen who had been employed as a fighter pilot by the group in charge of

the attack. This report was apparently referred to in a briefing given the President in December, 1960 by the Secretary of the President's Board of Consultants and it was also, I believe, distributed to several of the Cabinet members on a more or less need-to-know basis. At all events, it was a sensitive document and complaints were received, as I recall it, by the PBC for having let some of the Cabinet members see this rather critical report. The Attorney General had seen it and had been briefed by the Secretary of the President's Board of Consultants. As a consequence, the questioning dealt with this report and with the extraordinary identification which takes place in the minds of many of our foreign station heads with the native political ambitions, the political figures and their problems. This obviously introduces an element of substantial distortion and, in my opinion, a review of the CIA papers must always bear in mind the possibility that enthusiasm and emotionalism may distort the judgment of the reporting officer and thereby make it possible for planners to become seriously misled as to the consequences of this or that course of action.

A second subject dealt with, at considerable length, in the questions directed to me by the Board of Inquiry was whether or not it was reasonable to expect the CIA to undertake such an operation. I felt very strongly that it should not embark on a venture of this size since it called for military skills which, obviously, these young men did not have. Many of them had never served in the military forces and most of them were from academic backgrounds or otherwise insulated from the ugly problems of putting a group of men into jeopardy for a cause no matter how worthy.

I think these were the main points which formed the basis of the questions directed to me and were, indeed, the basis for a number of later conversations with the President on details of the CIA operations in the light of the five years which I had spent observing them from the

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President's Board of Consultants.

In one of these conversations with the President, I recall his asking me how much damage I thought the Bay of Pigs affair would do the U.S. prestige abroad. I told him that I thought the principal damage lay in the currency it would give to the idea that the Presidential advisers were a bunch of inexperienced and comparatively reckless young men who were not even intelligent enough to realize that you could not have a successful landing on a beach head without either artillery preparation by a Task Force of the Navy or constant aerial support and protection after taking out the enemy's air force. This had become a matter of such general knowledge that I felt the European Chancelleries, quite apart from enjoying the spectacle of the United States making such a complete jackass of itself, would find it in their hard hearts to sympathize with a President who was surrounded by what the British refer to as "Boffins" - a typical bit of British slang used to define an intellectual regardless of his accomplishments.

Q. From these subsequent conversations with President Kennedy, how would you estimate some of the consequences of the Bay of Pigs for his way of going about things? Did he draw the right lessons?

A. I believe the Bay of Pigs was not only a frightful shock to President Kennedy - causing him real grief and shame - but I think that it probably did a great deal to teach him some of the primary lessons that must be learnt by the man who has to make the ultimate judgment. Among these I would rate as number one, the necessity for the President to explore the end of any road he is urged to travel before he even sets out on it - to discuss all the consequences in cold detachment. In other words, he should always consider what happens if his program for this or that course of action fails; what is the effect on the country; what is the effect on our position internationally; does it adversely affect our national security. In the second

place, I think the President learned that his specialized advisers - notably, the military - should be used in their specialties and that there was no substitute for experience in arriving at a sound judgment. If you planned to have your appendix out - a very simple operation - you would certainly have it done by an experienced surgeon rather than a lawyer or an economist no matter how charming they might be.

I feel quite certain that the Bay of Pigs experience caused President Kennedy to lean more heavily on experienced military advisers and others with special training in their special fields. I believe the proof of this lay in the activities of the White House group in connection with the subsequent Cuban missile crisis. It is a difficult lesson to learn that high intelligence and sound judgment are two different qualities and that they frequently do not reside in the same person. Judgment, really sound judgment, seems to grow with experience. Just ask yourself whether you would choose a Nobel Prize winner, say Dr. Linus Pauling, or a New York City taxi driver, to drive you from Pennsylvania Station to LaGuardia Airport at five o'clock on a Friday afternoon. I hope you would pick experience and special skill over a very high I.Q. since I would like to think we might meet again.

Finally, and I think of great importance to President Kennedy, he learned that his ability to recover after a bad mistake was appreciated and admired by the American public with a generosity of mind not always credited to it.

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