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New Battle Over the Bay of Pigs Invasion

Court to Consider Whether CIA Must Disclose Report That Could Shift Blame for Failed Attack

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By **TENNILLE TRACY** [CONNECT](#)

July 12, 2013 6:23 p.m. ET

More than 50 years after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba, the Central Intelligence Agency and scholars are battling over the release of a secret document that could challenge assumptions about who was to blame for the famous fiasco.

A federal appeals court is set to hear arguments later this year on whether the CIA should be forced to disclose the document, the concluding volume of an official Bay of Pigs history written decades ago by a former CIA employee.



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A group of Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro's soldiers with artillery after routing the US-backed invasion at the Bay of Pigs. *Getty Images*

The 1961 invasion failed to topple Cuban leader Fidel Castro and led to recriminations in Washington. From the first days, analysts debated whether the mission failed because of CIA incompetence or because of decisions made by the new U.S. president, John F. Kennedy.

During the 1970s, the CIA assigned its historian, Jack Pfeiffer, to write an official Bay of Pigs history. Mr. Pfeiffer conducted dozens of interviews and sifted through hundreds of documents, producing a five-volume account by the time he retired in 1984.

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In the years since, the CIA has released four of the five volumes that Mr. Pfeiffer wrote, but it refuses to declassify the fifth. That has prompted a suit by the National Security Archive, a private research institute and library.

The Bay of Pigs invasion "is an important enough episode in U.S. history, we cannot rest

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until every page is released," said Peter Kornbluh, a senior analyst with the National Security Archive.



Peter Kornbluh, a senior analyst at the National Security Archive, is urging the CIA to declassify a report on the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. CREDIT: Tennille Tracy/The Wall Street Journal

The CIA says it excluded Volume V from the official history, making it therefore exempt from the Freedom of Information Act.

The Bay of Pigs invasion was launched in April 1961, when a brigade of 1,400 Cuban exiles, trained and armed by the CIA, invaded the island's southern coast. Their goal was to overthrow Mr. Castro, who had assumed power two years earlier.

But Mr. Castro's air force sank two escort ships and knocked out half of the exiles' air support. The outnumbered band took heavy

fire, and within three days, more than 100 members of what was known as Brigade 2506 had been killed. Nearly 1,200 were taken prisoner.

In the blame game that followed, the CIA suffered an early blow that remains influential to this day. The agency's own inspector general, Lyman Kirkpatrick, presented a scathing indictment of the CIA's performance following a six-month review conducted immediately after the invasion.



Members of Brigade 2506 are shown after their capture in Cuba during the ill-fated 1961 invasion by CIA-backed counter-revolutionaries. Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

Mr. Kirkpatrick's report accused the CIA of taking on a mission it couldn't handle. It said the agency underestimated Mr. Castro's regime, put together a poorly organized plan and kept U.S. decision makers in the dark. "The agency became so wrapped up in the military operation that it failed to appraise the chances of success realistically," the report said.

Volume V by Mr. Pfeiffer, the CIA historian, is of high interest because it analyzes Mr. Kirkpatrick's work—and, perhaps, his

motives. According to court documents, Mr. Pfeiffer, who died in 1997, believed Mr. Kirkpatrick "deliberately distorted the facts" in his audit and ignored the testimony of key witnesses. Mr. Pfeiffer alleged Mr. Kirkpatrick was trying to denigrate a top CIA officer who planned the invasion with the hope of eventually getting that officer's job.

"What Dr. Pfeiffer tried to do is vindicate the CIA in the long-standing historical debate over who lost Cuba," said Mr. Kornbluh of the National Security Archive. The problem for the CIA, he said, is that it also "has one of its own employees savagely attacking one of its most venerable officials."

The CIA declined to comment, citing continuing litigation.

Mr. Kirkpatrick, who died in 1995, joined the CIA at its inception in 1947 and contracted polio while on a mission, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down.

His eldest son, Lyman B. Kirkpatrick III, said his father had a "thankless" task. "Dad said that somebody had to look very carefully at the coordination that was done. And one of the problems was the lack of coordination," Mr. Kirkpatrick said. "As far as I know, whenever my dad did his job, he did it with all fairness to all parties concerned."

Audio

Tennille Tracy and WSJ's Shari Deutsch discuss the lawsuit

00:00 | 08:05

The CIA first declassified one of Mr. Pfeiffer's accounts, Volume III, in 1998 as part of a governmentwide effort to release records relating to President Kennedy's assassination. That report went unnoticed for seven years until David Barrett, a political-science professor at Villanova

University, discovered it at the National Archives in a box labeled "CIA Miscellaneous Box

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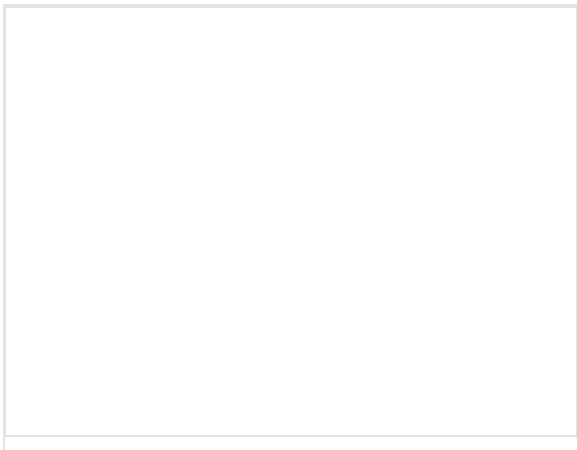
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In 2011, the CIA released three additional volumes—I, II and IV—in response to a Freedom of Information Act request from the National Security Archive. The volumes contain firsthand accounts depicting confusion in the invasion but don't delve into the CIA's internal investigation.

Mr. Pfeiffer himself wanted Volume V released, and he sued the CIA, but he lost in 1989.

A trial court ruled in 2012 that the CIA could keep the fifth volume secret. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit agreed to hear full arguments, and those are expected in the fall.

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