2 Kennedy’s Cuban Policies: Misconceptions and Missed Opportunities

The day before President-elect Kennedy assumed the duties of his new office, he met with the outgoing chief executive for a briefing on foreign policy issues. If Kennedy’s determination to take action against Cuba had been fashioned in the midst of the presidential campaign against Nixon, his resolve was doubtless fortified by his conversation with Eisenhower on that morning of 19 January 1961. Eisenhower, who a month before had referred sardonically to JFK as a “young whippersnapper,” now advised his successor to support guerrilla activities against Castro “as we cannot let the present government there go on.” Secretary of the Treasury Robert B. Anderson, also present at the meeting, agreed, arguing that “in the final analysis the United States may have to run Castro out of Cuba and wait until the foreign ministers of Latin America countries publicly complain about our action.”

On the following day, 20 January 1961, Senator Kennedy became President Kennedy. In his inaugural address, delivered on that bitterly cold afternoon, the new chief executive embroidered the theme of change which he had initially developed in his July 1960 “New Frontier” acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention. “The torch,” he declared, “has been passed to a new generation of Americans.” He spoke of the horrific dangers of nuclear weaponry, and the consequent need for the United States and Soviet Union “to begin anew.” Holding out the prospect for improved superpower relations, he stated that although America must “never negotiate out of fear,” it should “never fear to negotiate.”

Despite these expressions of optimism for a more harmonious future, Kennedy also framed the international scene in terms reminiscent of the 1930s. The coming years, he suggested, would be ones of crisis. “Only a few generations
Kennedy's Cuban Policies

have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility - I welcome it." Part of the answer to this upcoming challenge was provided by the new president: "Only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed." The words might have been culled straight from *Why England Slept.*

The extent to which Kennedy was committed to the pursuit of new avenues of co-operation with both Moscow and Havana was soon put to the test. Khrushchev and Castro were, for reasons of self-interest, hopeful that a Kennedy presidency would facilitate improved relations with the United States. At this point in time Khrushchev was under pressure from his own military to reverse defence cuts he had initiated a year earlier. A less acrimonious relationship with the United States would seem to justify his reductions in defence, whereas a heightening of superpower tensions would appear to necessitate the new increases in defence spending advocated by his military. After the presidential election, Khrushchev wrote to veteran diplomat Averell Harriman to say that he was pleased by the Democratic victory. "There was some indication," recalled Harriman, "that he (Khrushchev) felt this (the election of Kennedy) would mean that we could find methods of resolving some of our differences." In early 1961, a British official wrote privately of "Mr. Khrushchev's attempts to woo President[-elect] Kennedy." So when the Soviet premier (along with Leonid I. Brezhnev) wrote to congratulate Kennedy on his inauguration and to express the hope for "a fundamental improvement in relations between our countries," he was probably not being merely perfunctory.

Castro was also interested in ameliorating relations with the United States. During the last days of the Eisenhower administration, he had lived with the prospect of an imminent, American-organised invasion of his country. With reliable sources in the Cuban exile community in Florida, Castro was well aware of the CIA's plans for what would later become the Bay of Pigs operation. In late November 1960 he partially mobilised his 200 000 strong rural militia in case such an attack took place. On 2 January 1961 he ordered the ejection from Cuba of most of the officials working at