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Operation Northwoods

US PLANNED FAKE TERROR ATTACKS ON CITIZENS TO CREATE SUPPORT FOR CUBAN WAR

From [BODY OF SECRETS, James Bamford, Doubleday, 2001](#), p.82 and following.

..In [Joint Chief's chair] Lemnitzer's view, the country would be far better off if the generals could take over. [JFK assassination legend has it some general presided over the fudgy JFK autopsy. --Mk]

For those military officers who were sitting on the fence, the Kennedy administration's botched Bay of Pigs invasion was the last straw. "The Bay of Pigs fiasco broke the dike," said one report at the time. "President Kennedy was pilloried by the super patriots as a 'no-win' chief . . . The Far Right became a fount of proposals born of frustration and put forward in the name of anti-Communism. . . Active-duty commanders played host to anti-Communist seminars on their bases and attended or addressed Right-wing meetings elsewhere."

Although no one in Congress could have known it at the time, Lemnitzer and the Joint Chiefs had quietly slipped over the edge.

According to secret and long-hidden documents obtained for Body of Secrets, the Joint Chiefs of Staff drew up and approved plans for what may be the most corrupt plan ever created by the U.S. government. In the name of antiCommunism, they proposed launching a secret and bloody war of terrorism against their own country in order to trick the American public into supporting an ill-conceived war they intended to launch against Cuba.

Code named Operation Northwoods, the plan, which had the written approval of the Chairman and every member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called for innocent people to be shot on American streets; for boats carrying refugees fleeing Cuba to be sunk on the high seas; for a wave of violent terrorism to be launched in Washington, D.C., Miami, and elsewhere. People would be framed for bombings they did not commit; planes would be hijacked. Using phony evidence, all of it would be blamed on Castro, thus giving Lemnitzer and his cabal the excuse, as well as the public and international backing, they needed to launch their war.

The idea may actually have originated with President Eisenhower in the last days of his administration. With the Cold War hotter than ever and the recent U-2 scandal fresh in the public's memory, the old general wanted to go out with a win. He wanted desperately to invade Cuba in the weeks leading up to Kennedy's inauguration; indeed, on January 3 he told Lemnitzer and other aides in his Cabinet Room that he would move against Castro before the inauguration if only the Cubans gave him a really good excuse. Then, with time growing short, Eisenhower floated an idea. If Castro failed to provide that excuse, perhaps, he said, the United States "could think of manufacturing something that would be generally acceptable." What he was suggesting was a pretext a bombing, an attack, an act of sabotage carried out secretly against the United States by the United States. Its purpose would be to justify the launching of a war. It was a dangerous suggestion by a desperate president.

Although no such war took place, the idea was not lost on General Lemnitzer But he and his colleagues were frustrated by Kennedy's failure to authorize their plan, and angry that Castro had not provided an excuse to invade.

The final straw may have come during a White House meeting on February 26, 1962. Concerned that General Lansdale's various covert action plans under Operation Mongoose were simply becoming more outrageous and going nowhere, Robert Kennedy told him to drop all anti-Castro efforts. Instead, Lansdale was ordered to concentrate for the next three months strictly on gathering intelligence about Cuba. It was a humiliating defeat for Lansdale, a man more accustomed to praise than to scorn.

As the Kennedy brothers appeared to suddenly "go soft" on Castro, Lemnitzer could see his opportunity to invade Cuba quickly slipping away. The attempts to provoke the Cuban public to revolt seemed dead and Castro, unfortunately, appeared to have no inclination to launch any attacks against Americans or their property. Lemnitzer and the other Chiefs knew there was only one option left that would ensure their war. They would have to trick the American public and world opinion into hating Cuba so much that they would not only go along, but would insist that he and his generals launch their war against Castro. "World opinion, and the United Nations forum," said a secret JCS document, "should be favorably affected by developing the international image of the Cuban government as rash and irresponsible, and as an alarming and unpredictable threat to the peace of the Western Hemisphere."

Operation Northwoods called for a war in which many patriotic Americans and innocent Cubans would die senseless deaths, all to satisfy the egos of twisted generals back in Washington, safe in their taxpayer financed homes and limousines.

One idea seriously considered involved the launch of John Glenn, the first American to orbit the earth. On February 20, 1962, Glenn was to lift off from Cape Canaveral, Florida, on his historic journey. The flight was to carry the banner of America's virtues of truth, freedom, and democracy into orbit high over the planet. But Lemnitzer and his Chiefs had a different idea. They proposed to Lansdale that, should the rocket explode and kill Glenn, "the objective is to provide irrevocable proof that . . . the fault lies with the Communists et al Cuba [sic]."

This would be accomplished, Lemnitzer continued, "by manufacturing various pieces of evidence which would prove electronic interference on the part of the Cubans." Thus, as NASA prepared to send the first American into space, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were preparing to use John Glenn's possible death as a pretext to launch a war.

Glenn lifted into history without mishap, leaving Lemnitzer and the Chiefs to begin devising new plots which they suggested be carried out "within the time frame of the next few months."

Among the actions recommended was "a series of well coordinated incidents to take place in and around" the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. This included dressing "friendly" Cubans in Cuban military uniforms and then have them "start riots near the main gate of the base. Others would pretend to be saboteurs inside the base. Ammunition would be blown up, fires started, aircraft sabotaged, mortars fired at the base with damage to installations."

The suggested operations grew progressively more outrageous. Another called for an action similar to the infamous incident in February 1898 when an explosion aboard the battleship Maine in Havana harbor killed 266 U.S. sailors. Although the exact cause of the explosion remained undetermined, it sparked the Spanish-American War with Cuba. Incited by the deadly blast, more than one million men volunteered for duty. Lemnitzer and his generals came up with a similar plan. "We could blow up a U.S. ship in Guantanamo Bay and blame Cuba," they proposed; "casualty lists in U.S. newspapers would cause a helpful wave of national indignation."

There seemed no limit to their fanaticism: "We could develop a Communist Cuban terror campaign in the Miami area, in other Florida cities and even in Washington," they wrote. "The terror campaign could be pointed at Cuban refugees seeking haven in the United States."

We could sink a boatload of Cubans en route to Florida (real or simulated). . . . We could foster attempts on lives of Cuban refugees in the United States even to the extent of wounding in instances to be widely publicized."

Bombings were proposed, false arrests, hijackings:

*"Exploding a few plastic bombs in carefully chosen spots, the arrest of Cuban agents and the release of prepared documents substantiating Cuban involvement also would be helpful in projecting the idea of an irresponsible government."

*"Advantage can be taken of the sensitivity of the Dominican [Republic] Air Force to intrusions within their national air space. 'Cuban' B-26 or C-46 type aircraft could make cane burning raids at night. Soviet Bloc

incendiaries could be found. This could be coupled with 'Cuban' messages to the Communist underground in the Dominican Republic and 'Cuban' shipments of arms which would be found, or intercepted, on the beach. Use of MiG type aircraft by U.S. pilots could provide additional provocation."

*"Hijacking attempts against civil air and surface craft could appear to continue as harassing measures condoned by the Government of Cuba."

Among the most elaborate schemes was to "create an incident which will demonstrate convincingly that a Cuban aircraft has attacked and shot down a chartered civil airliner en route from the United States to Jamaica, Guatemala, Panama or Venezuela. The destination would be chosen only to cause the flight plan route to cross Cuba. The passengers could be a group of college students off on a holiday or any grouping of persons with a common interest to support chartering a non-scheduled flight."

Lemnitzer and the Joint Chiefs worked out a complex deception:

An aircraft at Elgin AFB would be painted and numbered as an exact duplicate for a civil registered aircraft belonging to a CJA proprietary organization in the Miami area. At a designated time the duplicate would be substituted for the actual civil aircraft and would be loaded with the selected passengers, all boarded under carefully prepared aliases. The actual registered aircraft would be converted to a drone [a remotely controlled unmanned aircraft]. Take off times of the drone aircraft and the actual aircraft will be scheduled to allow a rendezvous south of Florida.

From the rendezvous point the passenger-carrying aircraft will descend to minimum altitude and go directly into an auxiliary field at Elgin AFB where arrangements will have been made to evacuate the passengers and return the aircraft to its original status. The drone aircraft meanwhile will continue to fly the filed flight plan. When over Cuba the drone will be transmitting on the international distress frequency a "May Day" message stating he is under attack by Cuban MiG aircraft. The transmission will be interrupted by destruction of the aircraft, which will be triggered by radio signal. This will allow ICAO [International Civil Aviation Organization] radio stations in the Western Hemisphere to tell the U.S. what has happened to the aircraft instead of the U.S. trying to "sell" the incident.

Finally, there was a plan to "make it appear that Communist Cuban MiGs have destroyed a USAF aircraft over international waters in an unprovoked attack." It was a particularly believable operation given the decade of shoot downs that had just taken place.

In the final sentence of his letter to Secretary McNamara recommending the operations, Lemnitzer made a grab for even more power asking that the Joint Chiefs be placed in charge of carrying out Operation Northwoods and the invasion. "It is recommended," he wrote, "that this responsibility for both open and covert military operations be assigned to the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

At 2:30 on the afternoon of Tuesday, March 13, 1962, Lemnitzer went over last-minute details of Operation Northwoods with his covert action chief, Brigadier General William H. Craig, and signed the document. He then went to a "special meeting" in McNamara's office. An hour later he met with Kennedy's military representative, General Maxwell Taylor. What happened during those meetings is unknown. But three days later, President Kennedy told Lemnitzer that there was virtually no possibility that the U.S. would ever use overt military force in Cuba.

Undeterred, Lemnitzer and the Chiefs persisted, virtually to the point of demanding that they be given authority to invade and take over Cuba. About a month after submitting Operation Northwoods, they met the "tank," as the JCS conference room was called, and agreed on the wording of a tough memorandum to McNamara. "The Joint Chiefs of Staff believe that the Cuban problem must be solved in the near future," they wrote. "Further, they see no prospect of early success in overthrowing the present communist regime either as a result of internal uprising or external political, economic or psychological pressures. Accordingly they believe that military intervention by the United States will be required to overthrow the present communist regime."

Lemnitzer was virtually rabid in his hatred of Communism in general and Castro in particular "The Joint Chiefs of Staff believe that the United States can undertake military intervention in Cuba without risk of general war" he continued. "They also believe that the intervention can be accomplished rapidly enough to minimize communist opportunities for solicitation of UN action." However; what Lemnitzer was suggesting was not freeing the Cuban people, who were largely in support of Castro, but imprisoning them in a U.S. military-controlled police state. "Forces would assure rapid essential military control of Cuba," he wrote. "Continued police action would be required."

Concluding, Lemnitzer did not mince words: "[T]he Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend that a national policy of early military intervention in Cuba be adopted by the United States. They also recommend that such intervention be undertaken as soon as possible and preferably before the release of National Guard and Reserve forces presently on active duty."

By then McNamara had virtually no confidence in his military chief and was rejecting nearly every proposal the general sent to him. The rejections became so routine, said one of Lemnitzer's former staff officers, that the staffer told the general that the situation was putting the military in an "embarrassing rut." But Lemnitzer replied, "I am the senior military officer--it's my job to state what I believe and it's his [McNamara's] job to approve or disapprove." "McNamara's arrogance was astonishing," said Lemnitzer's aide, who knew nothing of Operation Northwoods. "He gave General Lemnitzer very short shrift and treated him like a schoolboy. The general almost stood at attention when he came into the room. Everything was 'Yes, sir' and 'No, sir!'"

Within months, Lemnitzer was denied a second term as JCS chairman and transferred to Europe as chief of NATO. Years later President Gerald Ford appointed Lemnitzer, a darling of the Republican right, to the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. Lemnitzer's Cuba chief, Brigadier General Craig, was also transferred. Promoted to major general, he spent three years as chief of the Army Security Agency, NSA's military arm.

Because of the secrecy and illegality of Operation Northwoods, all details remained hidden for forty years. Lemnitzer may have thought that all copies of the relevant documents had been destroyed; he was not one to leave compromising material lying around. Following the Bay of Pigs debacle, for example, he ordered Brigadier General David W Gray, Craig's predecessor as chief of the Cuba project within the JCS, to destroy all his notes concerning Joint Chiefs actions and discussions during that period. Gray's meticulous notes were the only detailed official records of what happened within the JCS during that time. According to Gray, Lemnitzer feared a congressional investigation and therefore wanted any incriminating evidence destroyed.

With the evidence destroyed, Lemnitzer felt free to lie to Congress. When asked, during secret hearings before a Senate committee, if he knew of any Pentagon plans for a direct invasion of Cuba he said he did not. Yet detailed JCS invasion plans had been drawn up even before Kennedy was inaugurated. And additional plans had been developed since. The consummate planner and man of details also became evasive, suddenly encountering great difficulty in recalling key aspects of the operation, as if he had been out of the country during the period. It was a sorry spectacle. Senator Gore called for Lemnitzer to be fired. "We need a shake up of the Joint Chiefs of Staff" he said. "We direly need a new chairman, as well as new members." No one had any idea of Operation Northwoods.

Because so many documents were destroyed, it is difficult to determine how many senior officials were aware of Operation Northwoods. As has been described, the document was signed and fully approved by Lemnitzer and the rest of the Joint Chiefs and addressed to the Secretary of Defense for his signature. Whether it went beyond McNamara to the president and the attorney general is not known.

Even after Lemnitzer lost his job, the Joint Chiefs kept planning "pretext" operations at least into 1963. Among their proposals was a deliberately create a war between Cuba and any of a number of .n American neighbors. This would give the United States military an excuse to come in on the side of Cuba's adversary and get rid of "A contrived 'Cuban' attack on an OAS [Organization of Americas] member could be set up," said one proposal, "and the attacked state could be urged to 'take measures of self-defense and request ice from the U.S. and OAS;

the U.S. could almost certainly obtain necessary two-thirds support among OAS members for collective action against Cuba."

Among the nations they suggested that the United States secretly were Jamaica and Trinidad-Tobago. Both were members of the Commonwealth; thus, by secretly attacking them and then blaming Cuba, the United States could lure England into the war Castro. The report noted, "Any of the contrived situations de above are inherently, extremely risky in our democratic system in which security can be maintained, after the fact, with very great difficulty. If the decision should be made to set up a contrived situation it be one in which participation by U.S. personnel is limited only to the most highly trusted covert personnel. This suggests the infeasibility of the use of military units for any aspect of the contrived situation."

The report even suggested secretly paying someone in the Castro government to attack the United States: "The only area remaining for ration then would be to bribe one of Castro's subordinate commanders to initiate an attack on [the U.S. naval base at] Guantanamo." The act suggested--bribing a foreign nation to launch a violent attack American military installation--was treason.

In May 1963, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul H. Nitze sent a the White House proposing "a possible scenario whereby an attack on a United States reconnaissance aircraft could be exploited toward the end of effecting the removal of the Castro regime." In the event Cuba attacked a U-2, the plan proposed sending in additional American pilots, this time on dangerous, unnecessary low-level reconnaissance missions with the expectation that they would also be shot down, thus provoking a war "[T]he U.S. could undertake various measures designed to stimulate the Cubans to provoke a new incident," said the plan. Nitze, however, did not volunteer to be one of the pilots.

One idea involved sending fighters across the island on "harassing reconnaissance" and "show-off" missions "flaunting our freedom of action, hoping to stir the Cuban military to action." "Thus," said the plan, "depending above all on whether the Cubans were or could be made to be trigger-happy, the development of the initial downing of a reconnaissance plane could lead at best to the elimination of Castro, perhaps to the removal of Soviet troops and the installation of ground inspection in Cuba, or at the least to our demonstration of firmness on reconnaissance." About a month later, a low-level flight was made across Cuba, but unfortunately for the Pentagon, instead of bullets it produced only a protest.

Lemnitzer was a dangerous-perhaps even unbalanced-right-wing extremist in an extraordinarily sensitive position during a critical period. But Operation Northwoods also had the support of every single member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and even senior Pentagon official Paul Nitze argued in favor of provoking a phony war with Cuba. The fact that the most senior members of all the services and the Pentagon could be so out of touch with reality and the meaning of democracy would be hidden for four decades.

In retrospect, the documents offer new insight into the thinking of the military's star-studded leadership. Although they never succeeded in launching America into a phony war with Cuba, they may have done so with Vietnam. More than 50,000 Americans and more than 2 million Vietnamese were eventually killed in that war.

It has long been suspected that the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident-the spark that led to America's long war in Vietnam-was largely staged or provoked by U.S. officials in order to build up congressional and public support for American involvement. Over the years, serious questions have been raised about the alleged attack by North Vietnamese patrol boats on two American destroyers in the Gulf But defenders of the Pentagon have always denied such charges, arguing that senior officials would never engage in such deceit.

Now, however, in light of the Operation Northwoods documents, it at deceiving the public and trumping up wars for Americans to fight and die in was standard, approved policy at the highest levels of the Pentagon. In fact, the Gulf of Tonkin seems right out of the Operation Northwoods playbook: "We could blow up a U.S. ship in Guantanamo Bay and blame Cuba . . . casualty lists in U.S. newspapers cause a helpful wave of indignation." One need only replace "Guantanamo Bay" with "Tonkin Gulf," and "Cuba" with "North Vietnam" and the Gulf of Tonkin incident may or may not have been stage-managed, but the senior Pentagon leadership at the time was clearly capable of such deceit.

Book epigram:

"The public has a duty to watch its Government closely and keep it on the right track." --Lieutenant Gen. Kenneth A. Minihan, USAF, Director, NSA, NSA Newsletter, June 1997