Operation Northwoods

The Pentagon’s Scripts for Overthrowing Castro

Tracy C. Davis

We cannot, as a free nation, compete with our adversaries in tactics of terror, assassination, false promises, counterfeit mobs and crises. [...] we possess weapons of tremendous power but they are least effective in combating the weapons most often used by freedom’s foes: subversion, infiltration, guerrilla warfare, civil disorder.

—President John F. Kennedy, 16 November 1961 (1962:725)

A review of Pentagon planning [in 1990...] makes it clear that for a small circle of high civilian and military officials, the idea that the United States might deliberately provoke events in Cuba that could serve as a pretext for U.S. intervention represented a possible course of action, frequently invoked, rather than an unthinkable libel that had emerged from the paranoid fantasies of Havana and Moscow.

—James G. Hershberg (1990:172)

In November 1961, President John F. Kennedy, determined to avoid another fiasco like the Bay of Pigs invasion—which was hatched under the Eisenhower administration, planned by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and carried out by Cuban émigrés the previous April—authorized Pentagon Joint Chiefs of Staff to develop a plan for dealing with Fidel Castro, who had been in power nearly two years. They created “Operation Mongoose,” a covert project aimed at making Cubans receptive to a counterrevolution, triggering an uprising, assisting Cubans in overthrowing Castro, and installing a government friendly to U.S. interests (Kennedy [1961] 1997; Lansdale [1961] 1997; White 1999:71–164; Hershberg 1990). The project was under the direction of Brigadier General Edward Lansdale and reported to the Special Group (Augmented), known as SGA, which included Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

Mongoose is important because it demonstrates the extent to which the Kennedy administration continued a bellicose stance toward its new Communist neighbor, long after the Bay of Pigs, and because unlike other anti-Cuban schemes that came to public attention through testimony before the 1975 Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (chaired by Frank Church), Mongoose involved not just the State Department, the National Security Council, the White House staff, and the Attorney General’s office, but was masterminded by the Pentagon. The Joint Chiefs were motivated by the desire to prevent Castro from spreading Communism elsewhere in Latin America. For them, time was of the essence (Nelson 2001:147). Evidence of Mongoose justifies, though only post hoc,
the Soviets’ increasingly defensive stance toward Cuba, to the extent that they began to construct missile launchers to defend the island in the summer of 1962.

Plots against Castro and his regime were rife in this period (Bundy [1963] 1996; Rabe 2000). As Senator Church explains in his introduction to published testimony from the 1975 Senate committee:

The only time when Fidel Castro permitted his island to become a base for Russian missiles, the only time during which it might have been said that he had become a threat to the security of the American people, was the one time when all assassination activity, plans, and plots against his life were stood down. (United States Senate 1976:xix)

Evidence that came to light in 1992 reveals that even during the Cuban Missile Crisis plots against Castro were proposed: the CIA sought approval to send in ten teams of subversives by submarine two days before Khrushchev capitulated to U.S. demands to dismantle the missile sites. However, neither Mongoose nor plots of CIA origin were regarded seriously by the U.S. administration as a viable tool during the Missile Crisis itself (McCone [1962] 1996; Halpern 1993; Parrott [1962] 1996). Unlike the plots against Castro’s life or reputation involving poisoned cigars, depilatory shoes, an exploding seashell, a contaminated diving suit, mobster assassins, and a poisoned hypodermic needle hidden in a ballpoint pen (U.S. Senate 1976:71–90), which were mooted by the CIA but rarely got off the drawing board, Operation Mongoose focused on utilizing a Cuban and Cuban-exile political base opposed to Castro, infiltrating the island, and instigating sabotage in order to spark the overthrow of the regime by internal revolt. To authorize any of this during the period of hyper-alertness surrounding the installation of the missile sites would have been to court disaster (Parrott [1962] 1996).

On 19 January 1962, Robert Kennedy assigned “top priority” to solving the Cuban problem. General Lansdale’s six-phase implementation schedule for Mongoose was approved by the SGA on 20 February 1962 for culmination the following October, though the project was almost immediately slowed down, and at the end of August the second phase was still in the planning stage (United States Senate 1976:72–73, 85, 88, 91, 141–45; Chang and Kornbluh [1992] 1998:36–37; Lansdale 1975). The six phases were titled:

A. Discredit and isolate the regime [largely diplomatic and propagandistic]
B. Harass the economy [sabotage]
C. Intensify intelligence collection
D. Split regime leadership and relations with [Soviet] Bloc
E. Assist Cuban exile groups and Latin American governments to take actions
F. Be prepared to exploit a revolt. (Lansdale 1962; White 1999:144–45)

By early October, still no sabotage had occurred (McCone [1962] 1992), though considerable intelligence had been gathered from Cuban refugees and diplomatic headway had been made with members of the Organization of American States.

“Operation Northwoods” was a separate proposal arising under the auspices of Mongoose, though it had a distinct objective toward Cuba. In March 1962, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, under the signature of Chairman General Lyman L. Lemnitzer, drew up the proposal for Northwoods and presented it to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Brigadier General William Craig (Lemnitzer 1962); it probably went no further.¹ More radical than Mongoose, Northwoods suggested ways to trick friendly governments and the public throughout the Americas into believing that the Castro regime posed a clear and immediate threat, in order to precipitate a pretext for invasion by U.S. forces. Northwoods was to be the basis for further planning, both for other covert activities as well as overt military action. Unlike most of Mongoose’s schemes, Northwoods is explicitly theatrical.

¹. Mack White depicts President Kennedy putting an end to it in his cartoon, “Operation Northwoods” (see White 2002).
Documentation of Operation Northwoods came to light as a result of the John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Act (1992), which declassified nearly four million pages now on deposit at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland (Nelson 2001:152). The Northwoods papers were published with excisions, including the project's name, in Mark J. White's The Kennedys and Cuba: The Declassified Documentary History (1999:110–15), but until then the plan remained unknown outside an extremely limited circle. The document was more widely disseminated via the George Washington University website for the National Security Archive, a foreign policy research institute, and digitized copies appear to stem from this source. James Bamford drew attention to the document in his book, Body of Secrets, a history of the National Security Agency published in April 2001. Bamford's exposé of Northwoods spawned two distinct reactions: initially, amazement at the brazenness of the proposal, and a few months later, confirmation (for those inclined toward conspiracy theories) that the U.S. government was capable of extraordinary malfeasance and unbounded audacity in proposing the staging of events that were to be a pretext for war, up to and including the U.S. attacking its own citizens but attributing it to another nation.

The principle behind Northwoods demonstrates, or so some claim, cause for speculation that the hijacking of four planes on 11 September 2001 might have been conducted by U.S. government operatives. Neither al-Qaeda nor any other terrorist organization immediately claimed credit for the hijackings, yet by the evening of 11 September, when President George W. Bush emerged from hiding to brief the nation, he already claimed to know the culprits. Within weeks the U.S. went to war in Afghanistan, allegedly to retaliate against al-Qaeda. Within months, the U.S. led a coalition in its second war, this time against Iraq, purportedly over Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and connections to al-Qaeda terrorists.

It is not my purpose to debate with the conspiracy theorists. Historical research is inconclusive enough without engaging in that kind of speculation. Instead, I want to take up what is described in the limited scholarly commentary upon Northwoods as its “outrageous” plots (Bamford 2001:84). What this attribution seems to point to is the striking degree to which Northwoods’ proposals depend upon basic performative techniques. The pretense, deceit, duplicity, substitution, sleight-of-hand, misdirection, counterfeit, and lying that are integral to acting and spectacle are also integral to Operation Northwoods. Neither a hallucinogen-laced cigar nor a wooden horse at the gates of Troy, it is instead a set of scenarios scripting the pretext for invading a sovereign nation by staging precipitating incidents so heinous as to effectively bring allies on board in a multinational effort to remove the Cuban president. In this, it is more like a carefully masterminded, deliberately malicious, and calculatingly public kidnapping of Helen than the presentation of the wooden horse: American troops would arrive later, fired with the indignation that Americans and their allies had been duped into feeling. If, as Jeffrey Mason asserts, “American nationality is especially susceptible to performance, for insofar as the nation itself is the product of invention or design, its nationality is a consequence of imagination and an object of negotiation” (1999:2), in Operation Northwoods the Pentagon works the weakness in this norm by mobilizing both exiled Cubans’ indignation at the appropriation of their nation by Communists and the fears of U.S. citizens about having a Communist stronghold at its backdoor. Project Northwoods puts performance at the service of conservative generals’ preferences for hawkish foreign policy in what would have been a glaring demonstration of dramatic license. But only the generals and select politicians were to know how to recognize a framed event in order to (correctly) contour their belief and disbelief. Audiences throughout the Americas, NATO allies, and the majority of Congress (who were needed to approve martial legislation) were not to perceive the frames that contained disbelief but instead were to react with indignation, valor, and decisive retribution. Historical hindsight highlights this difference.


Bamford characterizes Operation Northwoods as the product of ultraconservative senior military officers’ frustration with the liberal, youthful, and—to their taste—inexperienced Kennedy administration who had, among other transgressions (including embarrassing leaks), revoked funds for the remodeling of an officers’ club. Bamford argues that “although no one in Congress could have known it at the time, Lemnitzer and the Joint Chiefs had quietly slipped over the edge” by proposing “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” (2001:82).

According to Bamford, the impetus may even have originated with President Eisenhower, for he suggested that an invasion could be arranged in the days leading up to Kennedy’s inauguration if the Joint Chiefs “could think of manufacturing something that would be generally acceptable,” namely hostilities against U.S. forces or property (Memo of Meeting with the President on 3 January 1961, dated 9 January 1961; in Bamford 2001:83).

Robert Kennedy, who was ultimately in charge of the SGA, ordered all anti-Castro efforts to cease on 26 February 1962. By this time, planning for Lantphibex-1-62—a 40,000-person military exercise rehearsing techniques for amphibious invasion, which was slated for 9–24 April 1962—was well underway (Hershberg 1990:181). On 5 March, General Craig requested the Joint Chiefs to draw up pretexts for invading Cuba. On 7 March, the Joint Chiefs noted the unlikelihood of a Cuban revolt occurring within the year except by external provocation. On 8 March, the Navy apparently proposed actions to be taken in the vicinity of Guantánamo Bay, the 45-square-mile U.S. base close to the Windward Passage between Cuba and Haiti. On 13 March, Lansdale circulated a 22-page document to SGA detailing, department by department and agency by agency, activities for Mongoose in the period from March through July 1962. According to this document, the Joint Chiefs were to “continue the planning and essential preliminary actions to assure a decisive U.S. military capability for intervention” while expanding support for intelligence gathering (Lansdale [1962] 1998). On the same day, Lemnitzer presented his proposal for Operation Northwoods to McNamara. Three days later, President Kennedy pronounced he could “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” (in Bamford 2001:87). It was one of many, by then routine, rejections that Lemnitzer received from the administration, and within months he was transferred out of Washington. He subsequently denied the existence of Northwoods—which had had the support of every member of the Joint Chiefs—or any other plans for military overthrow of Castro. The proposal was not seen by commanders of unified or specific commands, U.S. officers in NATO, or the U.S. delegation to the U.N. Military Staff Committee. Lemnitzer ordered all copies destroyed. Yet “Copy No. 1” survived, and is reproduced alongside this commentary.

“Justification for U.S. Military Intervention in Cuba”

Military planners are narratological creatures. They think in terms of cause and effect, posing “what if” scenarios as preludes to gaming solutions (Hausrath 1971). Contrary to popular caricatures, their job does not begin when diplomacy fails, but is concurrent with diplomacy, tracking parallel to the actions of diplomats by identifying the sources of rising tension that prompt military readiness, and imagining the flashpoint when armed personnel would be mobilized. From that point, the actions of personnel are envisioned in the logistics of time and space, and strategists, not planners, are in charge. Military planners can be crude in the ways of political science but they are not necessarily naïve in the ways of theatre. This accounts for the straightforward narratology of the “Justification” for invading Cuba:

U.S. military intervention will result from a period of heightened U.S.-Cuban tensions which place the United States in the position of suffering justifiable grievances. World opinion, and the United Nations forum 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. (Lemnitzer 1962:2)

It was crucial, of course, to keep the Soviets out of the picture, which is why President Kennedy responded so strongly, on 11 October 1962, to irrefutable evidence that the Soviets had set up
launch sites for short- and medium-range ballistic missiles in Cuba. From that point, it would be impossible to take action against Cuba without incurring the risk of nuclear bombs precipitously raining on the U.S., in an arc reaching as far north as Washington, DC. From that point, it would be impossible to threaten Cuba without automatically involving the Soviets both politically and militarily. The installation of defensive missile launchers in Cuba was the Soviets’ hoped-for checkmate on any aggressive intentions toward Castro or his regime. Before any of this happened, before the Soviets took any overt measures to place offensive weapons in Cuba, to involve it in the Warsaw Pact or other alliance, and to establish a nuclear presence on the island, the Generals wanted to act decisively. The “Annex to the Appendix to Enclosure A” of Operation Northwoods is the template for doing so.

“Appendix to Enclosure A”

This document is addressed to William H. Craig, Chief of Operations for Mongoose. It elaborates on the “Justification” by making the relationship between an Operation Northwoods provocation and U.S. military intervention explicit, and though “Cuban rashness and irresponsibility on a large scale” might be “directed at other countries as well as the United States,” the U.S. would have to be seen as holding “defensible grievances” against a “threat to peace in the Western Hemisphere” (Lemnitzer 1962:5). The assignment of development and oversight for any operation to the Joint Chiefs is reinforced: the Generals did not want to play second fiddle to the CIA, the State Department, or any other agency, though their operatives might become involved in some manner. This means that they conceived of the military, which is primarily a \textit{reactive} force mobilized to respond to provocation, as also taking on the job of staging the provocation, establishing its mise-en-scène, and acting out the scenario, which are decidedly \textit{proactive} roles.

“Annex to Appendix to Enclosure A”

These “Pretexts to Justify U.S. Military Intervention in Cuba” are starting points for either a single or multiple “time-phased plan” of provocations which might involve other agencies under the command of the Joint Chiefs. “Harassment plus deceptive actions to convince the Cubans of imminent invasion would be emphasized” in a “cover and deception plan” (Lemnitzer 1962:4, 7). The point is to bait Castro to react; once the Cubans aggressed, the U.S. would have a pretext for justifiable invasion, regime change, and establishment of an occupying police state. Seemingly to do this with the support of Cubans themselves—for example, following a sizable popular uprising, or immediately mobilizing counterrevolutionary Cubans—was crucial to the plan and a major distinction from the Bay of Pigs invasion (Aguilar 1981:xii).

Guantánamo would be the most likely site for carrying out the strategy. Paragraph 2 stipulates the mildest versions of provocation, with anti-Castro troops equipped by the U.S. faking assaults and attacking the U.S. Navy’s base at Guantánamo. Standard disinformation tactics might accompany an overt attack from land or sea, the capture of planted saboteurs, or civil disturbances at the gate of the base. The CIA had 212 Cuban exiles trained and waiting at Fort Benning, Georgia, to aid in such scenarios (Bardach 2002:175). What would be most visible, however, would be the explosion of a ship in Guantánamo Bay, beyond the narrows at its entrance and somewhere along its 12-mile length. The “victims” would be Americans, and the Joint Chiefs would stage their funerals. Immediate retaliation to secure the base would result in the destruction of supposed Cuban artillery, escalating to a wider war.

4. This tactic had also been mooted to Eisenhower in a National Security Council meeting of 3 January 1962 (Higgins 1987:71)

SECRET

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Subject: Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba (US)

1. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have considered the attached Memorandum for the Chief of Staff, Cuba Project, which responds to a request of that office for brief but precise description of pretexts which would provide justification for US military intervention in Cuba.

2. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend that the proposed memorandum be forwarded as a preliminary submission suitable for planning purposes. It is assumed that there will be similar submissions from other agencies and that these inputs will be used as a basis for developing a time-phased plan. Individual projects can then be considered on a case-by-case basis.

3. Further, it is assumed that a single agency will be given the primary responsibility for developing military and para-military aspects of the basic plan. It is recommended that this responsibility for both overt and covert military operations be assigned the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

For the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

L. L. Lemnitzer
Chairman
Joint Chiefs of Staff

1 Enclosure
Memo for Chief of Operations, Cuba Project
EXCLUDED FROM ODS

TOP SECRET SPECIAL HANDLING NOTORUN

ANNEX TO APPENDIX TO ENCLOSED AN

SECRET OFFICIAL HANDLING

ANNEX TO APPENDIX TO ENCLOSED A

PRONUNTS TO JUSTIFY US MILITARY INTERVENTION IN CUBA

(Note: The sources of action which follow are a preliminary submission suitable only for planning purposes. They are arranged neither chronologically nor in sequential order. Together with similar inputs from other agencies, they are intended to provide a point of departure for the development of a single, integrated, time-phased plan. Such a plan would permit the evaluation of individual projects within the context of cumulative, correlated actions designed to lead inexorably to the objective of adequate justification for US military intervention in Cuba.)

1. Since it would seem desirable to use legitimate provocation as the basis for US military intervention in Cuba, a cover and deception plan, to include requisite preliminary actions such as has been developed in response to Task 33 c, could be executed as an initial effort to provoke Cuban reactions. Infiltration plus deception actions to provoke the Cubans of imminent invasion would be emphasized. Our military posture throughout execution of the plan will allow a rapid change from exercises to intervention if Cuban response justifies.

2. A series of well co-ordinated incidents will be planned to take place in and around Guantanamo Bay to give genuine appearance of being done by hostile Cuban forces.

a. Incidents to establish a credible attack (not in chronological order):

(1) Start rumors (many). Use clandestine radio.
(2) Land friendly Cubans in uniform "over-the-fence" to stage attack on base.
(3) Capture Cuban (friendly) saboteurs inside the base.
(4) Start riots near the base main gate (friendly Cubans).

Annex to Appendix A

7
(5) Blow up ammunition inside the base; start fires.
(6) Burn aircraft on air base (sabotage).
(7) Lob mortar shells from outside of base into base.
(8) Damage to installations.
(9) Capture assault teams approaching from the sea or vicinity of Guantanamo City.
(10) Sabotage ship in harbor; large fires — napalm.
(11) Strike ship near harbor entrance. Conduct funerals for crew-victims (may be lieu of (10)).

b. United States would respond by executing offensive operations to secure water and power supplies, destroying artillery and mortar emplacements which threaten the base.

c. Commence large scale United States military operations.

3. A “compromise the Nation” incident could be arranged in several forms:

a. We could blow up a US ship in Guantanamo Bay and blame Cuba.

b. We could blow up a drone (unarmed) vessel anywhere in the Cuban waters. We could arrange to cause such incident in the vicinity of Havana or Santiago as a spectacular result of Cuban attack from the air or sea, or both. The presence of Cuban planes or ships merely investigating the intent of the vessel could be fairly compelling evidence that the ship was taken under attack. The response to Havana or Santiago would not be credibility expensive to those people that might have been the blast or have seen the fire. The US could follow up with an air/sea rescue operation covered by US fighters to “rescue” remaining members of the non-existent crew. Casualty lists in US newspapers would cause a helpful wave of national indignation.

4. We could develop a Dominican Cuban terror campaign in the Miami area, in other Florida cities and even in Washington.

Annex to Appendix

To Disclosure A
7. Hijacking attempts against civil air and surface craft should appear to continue as harassing measures conducted by the government of Cuba. Concurrently, genuine defections of Cuban civil and military air and surface craft should be encouraged.

8. It is possible to create an incident which will demonstrate convincingly that a Cuban aircraft has attacked and shot down a chartered civil airline aircraft 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.

a. An aircraft at Eglin AFB would be painted and numbered as an exact duplicate for a civil registered aircraft belonging to a GIA 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.

b. 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 Eglin 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 begin 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 radio stations in the Western hemisphere to tell the US what has happened to the aircraft instead of the US trying to "sell" the incident.

9. It is possible to create an incident which will make it appear that Cuban MiG aircraft have destroyed a USN aircraft over international waters in an unprovoked attack.

a. Approximately 4 or 5 P-124 aircraft will be dispatched in trail from Roosevelt AAB, Florida, to the vicinity of Cuba. Their mission will be to recover and simulcate hostile aircraft for an air defense exercise in southern Florida. These aircraft would conduct variations of these flights at frequent intervals. Crews would be briefed to remain at least 15 miles off the Cuban coast; however, they would be required to carry live ammunition in the event that hostile actions were taken by the Cuban MiGs.

b. On one such flight, a pre-calibrated pilot would fly tail-end chasing at an considerable interval between aircraft. While near the Cuban coast this pilot would broadcast that he had been jumped by MiGs and was going down. No other calls would be made. The pilot would then fly directly west at extremely low altitude and land at a secure base, on Eglin territory. The aircraft would be seen by the proper people, quickly seized and given a new tail number. The pilot who had performed the mission under an alias, would resume his proper identity and return to his normal place of business. The pilot and aircraft would then have disappeared.

10. At practically the same time that the aircraft was presumably shot down a submarine or small surface craft would discharge 3-100 parts, parachute, etc., at approximately 15 to 80 miles off the Cuban coast and depart. The pilots returning to Roosevelt would have a true story as far as they knew. Several ships and aircraft would be disposed of parts of aircraft found.

Annex to Appendix A

Annex to Appendix A
The document also refers to the slogan “Remember the Maine” (Lemnitzer 1962). This reference recollects an incident preceding the Spanish-American War of 1898. Entrepreneurs from the U.S. had invested heavily in Cuba, and the USS Maine was sent to Havana harbor in January 1898 to protect the lives and property of U.S. citizens in the aftermath of the mutiny of Spanish troops and the start of the Cuban uprising. It represented U.S. imperial interests in the region, though its image at home was as an anticolonial democratic liberator. On 15 February, the Maine mysteriously blew up, killing 260 seamen. The slogan “Remember the Maine, to hell with Spain!” was championed in the U.S. press, and it became the call to arms against Spain, a pretext for the war that followed in April to liberate Cuba from Spain and attempt to incorporate the island into the U.S. The cause of the Maine’s destruction was never determined and remains shrouded in doubt. Even its Captain did not blame the Spanish (DeTemple 2001).

Lemnitzer calculated that staging an attack on a U.S. Naval ship by faked Cuban air or naval vessels within sight of Cuba would resurrect the memory of the Maine: doing it within sight would be crucial for catching Cubans’ attention. Valiant but futile efforts to save the “crew” and the faked reports of casualties would catch the attention of Americans and exiled Cubans on the mainland.

Alternately, a shipload of Cubans could be blown up en route to Florida, one incident in a “terror campaign” designed to mobilize sympathy in Miami and Washington, DC. As part of a pattern of targeted “attacks” committed against Cubans abroad and attributed to Castro’s Communists, including bombings on the U.S. mainland, it hardly mattered for the Pentagon’s purposes whether or not real people were killed. The whole thing would be a masquerade, supported by fake documents and false publicity, in order to discredit Castro, keeping anti-Communism as the political crux.

On 14 June 1959, exiled Dominicans launched an invasion of the Dominican Republic. Aided and inspired by Castro, who had successfully overthrown the U.S.-supported Batista dictatorship earlier that year, they sought to oust Rafael Molino Trujillo, another U.S.-backed despot who had held power since 1930. These irregular military adventurers were in the tradition of filibusters, the mercenary Americans who participated in Latin American insurrections in the 1850s. The heroes of 14 June were shot down by Trujillo’s air force, then tortured and executed. Following this debacle, the CIA continued to clandestinely back Dominican conspirators, including those who successfully ambushed and shot Trujillo in 1961. The filibuster plot against Cuba proposed by the Joint Chiefs participates consciously in this history, seeking to involve a third nation and, using Soviet ammunition, to stage a “Cuban” attack in its politically volatile neighboring nation, and to have “Cubans” arm insurgents and interfere in the political affairs of a sovereign nation.

The scenarios suggested in the Northwoods document get even more convoluted. The Joint Chiefs propose disguising an American plane to look like a Soviet fighter jet. A memorandum notes that an “American manufacturer had stated he could produce and deliver Russian-type MiGs or Russian-type IL 14’s in 90 days” (United States Department of State [1962] 1997a:776). This jet would be used to harass or attack civilian aircraft, surface shipping, and Air Force drones. It was crucial that witnesses—including supposedly impartial civilians and well-informed professionals—be able to identify the offending aircraft as being of Soviet origin, and therefore supplied to the Cubans by an enemy nation making incursions into the Americas. It would take a few months to manufacture the look-alike, which was a drawback because the Joint Chiefs sought an almost imminent conflict.

These plans were not, of course, mutually exclusive. Other concurrent disruptions of civil aircraft and shipping were recommended. These could be faked hijackings under the auspices of the Cubans, while “genuine defections” of other vessels were also encouraged. Perhaps the fakes would stimulate a wave of authentic defections.

The final two suggestions are the most elaborate among the Northwoods proposals. In one, a charter aircraft supposedly laden with American college students or some such civilian group would be convincingly shot down by Cuban aircraft over the island of Cuba, while en route to Jamaica, Guatemala, Panama, or Venezuela. The civilian aircraft would actually be a CIA-owned drone, fitted to exactly duplicate a real plane from a civil fleet based in Miami. The substitution of aircraft would have to be carefully coordinated. The unmanned drone, flying low over Cuba, would signal that it
was under attack by Cuban MiGs. A radio signal would trigger its detonation. This was an important aspect of the plan: in order to “authenticate” the supposed civilian aircraft’s destruction, the Joint Chiefs wanted the mayday and explosion to be picked up by members of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the regulating body that subdivides the earth into air navigation regions and controls air traffic. Its members’ reports would be more convincing than the U.S. government reporting the incident to the press.

The last plot involves staging an “unprovoked attack” on a U.S. Air Force aircraft engaged in routine exercises off the coast of Cuba. A group of four or five F-101 supersonic jets would set out from Homestead Air Force Base (AFB), 25 miles south of Miami, and fly in various formations just beyond Cuba’s territorial waters. These training missions would be repeated several times until one pilot, who was in on the plot and flying under an alias, would lag behind, flying low and last (the tail-end Charley position). He would radio that his plane had been shot by Cuban MiGs, then make a beeline for Eglin AFB in the Florida panhandle, remaining under the radar the whole way. Upon arrival at Eglin, the plane would be stowed and rapidly transformed with a new identification number, and the pilot would resume his real identity. The other pilots from the exercise would have returned to Homestead by this time, telling what they believed to be a true tale of a stricken comrade. Meanwhile, a U.S. submarine or other boat would distribute the pilot’s parachute and parts identifiable as an F-101 off the Cuban coast in the vicinity of the stricken plane’s position. An air and sea search-and-rescue mission would find and identify the debris.

Without the authentication of the ICAO, the press releases might not be as persuasive, but the plan still had the advantage of the prolonged search, heartbreaking discovery, and inevitable build-up of opinion agitating for retribution. Executing the next step would be in the hands of the U.S. military. This was precisely what the Pentagon sought.

Analysis

Just as the type of actions advocated in Mongoose were not limited to the period preceding the Cuban Missile Crisis, Operation Northwoods was not entirely unique in its approach. In 1962 the Department of Defense Project Officer for Mongoose proposed comparable schemes utilizing cover and deception:

—Operation HORN SWOGGLE: Crash or force down Cuban MiG aircraft [...] by use of overriding transmitters and either a decoy aircraft or solid weather conditions, override Cuban controller and have Cuban refugee pilot issue instructions which run MiG out of fuel or toward Florida, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, a carrier, etc. [...] 

—Operation FREE RIDE: Create unrest and dissension among the Cuban people [...] by air-dropping valid Pan American or KLM one-way airline tickets good for passage to Mexico City, Caracas, etc. (none to the U.S.). Tickets could be intermixed with other leaflets planned to be dropped. [...] 

—Operation DIRTY TRICK: The objective is to provide irrevocable proof that, should the MERCURY manned orbit flight fail, the fault lies with the Communists et al. [...] 

—Operation BINGO: The objective is to create an incident which has the appearance of an attack on U.S. facilities (GMO) [Guantánamo] in Cuba, thus providing the excuse for use of U.S. military might to overthrow the current government of Cuba. [...] This is to be accomplished by the use of SNAKES [explosives] outside the confines of the Guantánamo Base. [...] Cubans are to think the base is under attack and counterattack. [...] Guantánamo could disgorge military force in sufficient number to sustain itself until other forces, which had been previously alerted, could attack in other areas. (Memorandum from William H. Craig to Edward G. Lansdale, 2 February 1962; in White 1999:101–04)

Free Ride is a variant on well-established psychological warfare techniques, and Dirty Trick is vague in its details about whether the U.S. would be culpable of sacrificing John Glenn (captain of the first U.S.-manned orbital flight, 20 February 1962) prior to a propaganda campaign to lay blame on the Cubans. Horn Swoggle and Bingo are more in the style of the slightly later Operation Northwoods,
because they deploy not just deceit, but also embodied enactment of deceit that sets in motion an unfolding plot of multiple actions. Horn Swoggle relies on electronic impersonation. Bingo is set into motion by what amounts to misheard firecrackers, prompting retaliatory fire from U.S. troops, and then an invasion; the element of surprise would be used to advantage and Cuban forces would be overwhelmed.

Mongoose's program of propaganda—consisting of radio and television broadcasting, balloon drops of leaflets, distribution of photo-novels and cartoon books by open mail, and dissemination of smuggled copies of *Time* magazine—is integral to the preparation of the population in Cuba for regime change. Basic Madison Avenue techniques, such as “create musical and visual symbols to express anti-regime sentiments,” were a specialty of the U.S. Information Agency, which managed the *Voice of America*, and the technique of adding “new words to a favorite song” was a staple of political subversion at least since *The Beggar’s Opera*. Thus, the transmission of anti-Castro sentiment was to function seamlessly in everyday activities, capable of being passed person-to-person while augmenting less embodied techniques such as painted slogans. The CIA worked on “a hand symbol as easy to do as ‘V for Victory,’” a tactile, nonverbal sign of anti-Castro sentiment, which the Cuban people could retain in their memories, holding it in abeyance until circumstances allowed (United States Department of State [1962] 1997b:816). While there are elements of spectacle in these schemes, Northwoods, by contrast, also involves overt elements of the theatrical: not just embodiment but enactment; not just a scheme for action but a plot for deceitful action; not just coordinated behavior but purposeful behavior for the creation of faith in an illusion.

Whether or not the Northwoods proposals might be called outrageous, audacious, ludicrous, nefarious, disreputable, or even desperate, later events mitigate against them being called preposterous. After all, under President Lyndon Johnson, the blowing up of two Naval vessels near enemy waters—or rather the claim that an enemy had done so—was perpetrated in the Tonkin Gulf, resulting in national outrage and the *casus belli* for a Congressional mandate to go to war against Vietnamese Communists. It was later proved that the CIA had sponsored extensive sabotage in the region and that only the attack on the first vessel was authentic (Andrade and Conboy 1999; Möise 1996). What makes the Northwoods proposals notable is the degree to which they are theatrical conspiracies, setting out the interrelatedness of plot elements; the involvement of several groups of linked covert conspirators, widely dispersed geographically; a full panoply of disguises for people as well as property; the substitution, in some cases, of simulacrum for event; and manipulation of plot elements in order to stimulate belief among those persons necessary to (mistakenly) testify to the authenticity of the fabrication.

Definitions of “the theatrical event” have undergone overhauls in recent years, in the attempt to eliminate cultural bias and to account for poststructural indeterminacy. Some of the most recent versions to be presented to the International Federation for Theatre Research have been gathered together as *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics, Frames* (2004). Vicki Ann Cremona, for example, explains:

> The basis of the theatrical event is the encounter between different participants, where the boundaries between performer and spectator are in a state of flux. This fluid situation changes not only the context, but the quality of production and communication. [...] The sharing of the same space, which reveals a collective intent, can vary from a simple juxtaposition of presence that establishes a minimal level of connection, to a harmonizing common physical action. [...] The participant can shift role from actor to spectator and vice-versa, thereby determining each time a different level and quality of engagement and a varying degree of involvement. (2004:30)

This applies to the plans laid out in Operation Northwoods in that participants in a plot, such as the Air Force pilots who lose track of their “tail-end Charley” colleague, hear his mayday, then return to base without him, switch from being actors to being witnesses, and in so doing testify to their experience and become actors playing the part of an audience. Just as they share a space, or proximity, with their supposedly downed colleague, as witnesses they would later predicate a shared
emotional state with their entire nation. In this analysis, the theatrical elements of Northwoods lie not only in its utilization of pretense, but also in its extension of the idea of audience/witness to the expression of belief, faith, and testament that brings about collective response, emphasizing the fluidity of actor/audience functions.

Temple Hauptfleisch argues that the theatrical event “can refer to the entire complex of processes occurring in and around a play space at a particular time, which includes performers, text, audience and the greater context (historical, social, political, cultural and economic) within which it takes place” (2004:280). In the case of Operation Northwoods, a conception of the theatrical event that requires liveness and presence would relegate the proposals to being mere templates for a set of events, rather than events per se, rendering Northwoods by these criteria as theatrical only in potential. Alternately, Hauptfleisch identifies another strain in research that emphasizes the framing of events: if something is framed as dramatic or theatrical, “and shown and/or looked at and interpreted as if it were a scripted event,” then it is turned into a theatrical event (281). In other words, Northwoods is theatrical once I say it is so, provided that I am supported by the contextualizing cultural system. I would hope to offset such an easy conclusion by providing more definitive analytical description, precise terminology, and complex similarity.

From a conventional historical perspective, Northwoods is one among many curiosities pertaining to the Kennedy administration’s handling of Cuba. From a conventional historical perspective, it is documentation of discussions, of a proposal, and perhaps of a point of view held by the Joint Chiefs. Beyond that, because it was not implemented, and indeed because it seems to have been quickly squelched by McNamara and Craig, it is not “history.” But from the perspective of a performance historian, it is a set of ideologically linked scenarios that demonstrate a line of thought ratiﬁed by the Joint Chiefs: thought made concrete as a set of actions that are templates for events that were—on some level—imaginable and advocated. Northwoods was not implemented, and in that sense it is not history, but neither is it fiction. Like a dramatic script, it exists as actions in potential, yet, like a dramatic script that is read, it results in imaginative acts that make its reading historizable. It exists as potential that was (once) acted upon insofar as Lemnitzer envisioned the scenarios and sought approval for them from higher authorities, and this in itself was a form of performance.

The recognition of elements ubiquitous in dramatic writing and stage performance in other cultural manifestations—whether a written document or a news story, a community event or an international dispute, an ideological conﬂict or witnesses’ contrasting points of view—is not merely resemblance; it depends upon the borrowing or appropriation of elements from theatre and drama, as well as the ontology of “script” or “performance.” Thus, the Joint Chiefs propose ways to stage the provocation that could lead to war. In such a case, “stage” is not only a verb indicating the calculated orchestration of events, but also stands for a process that deliberately blurs the demarcations between simulations and their legitimization. Performance, by these terms, is not so much the context of Northwoods as its precondition. Even if the Northwoods scenarios were never carried out, their dependence upon the theatrical is not diminished. And it is this dependence that makes them striking—even “outrageous”—to readers who discover them more than four decades later. Even if we are made suspicious as a result of their resemblance to theatre, we marvel at the imaginative plot-writing inherent to them and the embodied enactments that they prescribe. As Northwoods appropriates elements of drama and theatre, it utilizes the citationality inherent in performance in order to perpetrate a desired outcome, and it merely obscures—never denies—the presence of the masquerade.

Northwoods appeals to conspiracy theorists not just because it shows the kind of conspiratorial thinking that we might suspect of an ideologically extreme or unscrupulous government, but also because it deploys rhetorical citations of untrustworthy techniques. Duplicity is a time-honored technique of the theatre, and if any part of a scenario can be perceived to be far-fetched, suspicion of duplicity arises. Northwoods’ success, in implementation, would depend upon the maintenance of all aspects of credibility. Just as the working name “Mongoose” implies a small, unassuming, yet vicious predator that operates openly by day, capable of moving by sea or land, and is not indigenous to the Americas, “Northwoods” implies the deflection of attention away from the staged scene of provocation in the Caribbean. Northwoods connotes something clean and brisk, as far as possible
from the underhanded corruption or tangled undergrowth of the Cuban "police state." Deflection of attention—Havana for Washington, Baghdad or Pyongyang for Kabul—is a standard technique of public opinion manipulation. And even John F. Kennedy, for all the honor accrued to him for levelheaded service during the Cuban Missile Crisis, headed an administration that promoted assassination plots against not only Castro and Trujillo but also Patrice Lumumba of the Congo, and Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu of Vietnam (United States Senate 1976). Days before authorizing the creation of Mongoose, Kennedy declared in a speech at the University of Washington:

We cannot, as a free nation, compete with our adversaries in tactics of terror, assassination, false promises, counterfeit mobs and crises. [...] We possess weapons of tremendous power—but they are least effective in combating the weapons most often used by freedom’s foes: subversion, infiltration, guerrilla warfare, civil disorder. (1962:725)

If deceit is perpetrated once, is the perpetrator always a deceiver? Is the deceiver’s institution forever tainted? Or is deceit simply an exigent necessity of the presidency, as inherent to the office as performance is to the American nation?

References

AfroCubaWeb.com

Aguilar, Luis

Andrade, Dale, and Kenneth Conboy

AntiOffline.com

Attack on America.net

Bamford, James

Bardach, Ann Louise

Bundy, McGeorge

Chang, Laurence, and Peter Kornbluh, eds.

Cremona, Vicki Ann

DeTemple, Jill
The Emperor’s New Clothes


FreemasonryWatch.org

FromTheWilderness.com

Gowland, Rob

Halpern, Samuel
1993 “Revisiting the Cuban Missile Crisis.” SHAFR Newsletter 24, 4:17–24.

Hausrath, Alfred H.

Hauptfleisch, Temple

Hershberg, James G.

Higgins, Trumbull

Kennedy, John F.


Lansdale, Edward G.

1975 Examination by the President’s Commission on CIA Activities, 16 May. Gerald R. Ford Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.


Lemnitzer, Lyman L.

McCon, John A.

Mason, Jeffrey D.

Möise, Edwin E.

The National Security Archive


Nelson, Anna Kasten

Parrott, Thomas A.

Rabe, Stephen G.

United States Department of State


United States Senate

Valentine, Carol A.

White, Mack

White, Mark J.