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'Covert City' Review: The Cold War in Miami

In South Florida communities of Cuban exiles, CIA planners hatched multiple schemes to topple Castro.

By Edward Kosner April 26, 2024 at 11:03 am ET

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A Cuban refugee in Miami watches President Kennedy address the nation on the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. PHOTO: BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES

Miami has always been an American outlier—a subtropical metropolis full of glitz, intrigue, new money and an energetic cohort of sun-baked old timers.

For many fans of 1980s television, the city will forever be the turf of Sonny Crockett and Rico Tubbs, the swaggering fashion-plate cops played by Don Johnson and Philip Michael Thomas in "Miami Vice."

But there is another Miami—the magnet for refugees from Fidel Castro's Cuba, Nicolás Maduro's Venezuela and elsewhere in Latin America, and the epicenter of plots by these migrants to reclaim their homelands.

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Covert City: The Cold War and the Making of Miami

By Vince Houghton and Eric Driggs PublicAffairs 256 pages

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This latter Miami is the ostensible subject of "Covert City: The Cold War and the Making of Miami" by Vince Houghton, a historian and the director of the NSA's National Cryptologic Museum, and Eric Driggs, a congressional liaison staffer for the U.S. Southern Command. Their book is a compact, straightforward account of the failed efforts by various exiles and a succession of U.S. administrations to unseat Cuba's Communist regime. It also details the campaign against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Much of the scheming and planning took place in Miami, but the city is more a backdrop than center stage of the book's drama.

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The godfather of Cuban independence is José Martí, the heroic poet and orator who fought for his country's liberation from Spain. By the late 19th century, Martí had organized dozens of chapters of his Cuban Revolutionary Party around the U.S. and the Caribbean. In January 1895, he devised a plan to smuggle weapons and fighters into Cuba via three boats from Fernandina Beach in northeast Florida. The mission failed, as so many more would in the years to come. Martí died four months later in the Battle of Dos Rios, but remained the emotional inspiration for all subsequent efforts to free the island.

Barely two weeks after Castro came down from the Sierra Maestra in January 1959 to seize power in Havana, the CIA established a one-man office in Miami. It was the first step in what would be a long, misbegotten effort to oust the dictator who would give the Soviets a beachhead—and a missile base—in the Western hemisphere 90 miles from Key West. In time, the American campaign included enlisting the Chicago mobster Sam Giancana to murder Castro with untraceable poison pills (which didn't do the job).

The heart of the overall effort, the authors write, involved recruiting eager Cuban exiles in Miami and elsewhere in Florida, training them in the Everglades and turning them loose in a mix of forays against the island. Soon there were so many jealousy-riddled exile groups vying for influence in Miami and beyond that the CIA had to issue a "Cuban Counter-Revolutionary Handbook," a guide for perplexed agency hands tasked with handling the groups. In time the CIA station, with an annual budget of \$500 million in current dollars, became the single largest employer in Miami.

The first try at parachuting weapons to anti-Castro elements in Cuba wound up with the arms dropped into the lap of Castro's loyalists, an omen of future failures. Coastal raids also failed dismally. All of this was a prelude to the Bay of Pigs.

John F. Kennedy's 1961 fiasco was the ultimate effort by Cuban exiles trained and supported— inadequately—by the U.S. to end communist rule in Cuba. Earlier, Kennedy had told a group of Cuban exiles: "Your destiny is to suffer." He could not have known how right he would be. Describing the Bay of Pigs "disaster," the authors write: "Of the 1,400 Cuban exiles who were part of the operation, more than 100 were killed and almost 1,200 were captured. The 2506 Brigade POWs spent twenty months in Cuban prisons, before they were finally exchanged for \$53 million worth of baby food and pharmaceuticals."

In Miami, the Cuban exiles—many of them bilingual professionals—and their families thrived. Taking advantage of these human resources, the authors write, "Dow Chemical, International Harvester, Eastman Kodak, Pfizer, and over twenty-five other major companies established Latin American headquarters in Miami." At the same time, the Cuban community there was certain that Castro—who had already decimated the counterrevolutionary underground on the island—had planted spies among them to create discord.

Less than a year after the Bay of Pigs, there was a new plan—the brainchild of Edward Lansdale, the CIA "idea man" who had led counterinsurgency operations against the rebel Huks in the Philippines and later the Viet Minh in Vietnam. Lansdale's scheme, code-named Mongoose, was a complex enterprise. The six-phase plan involved stirring rebellion and guerrilla operations in Cuba, culminating in an "open revolt" that would topple Castro and install a new regime. One of Mongoose's elements had Cuban exiles playing Castro troops attacking the American base at Guantanamo Bay—giving the U.S. a casus belli to invade Cuba.

Like the other schemes and forays documented in "Covert City," Mongoose is an artifact of the long twilight struggle to remove the strategic threat and psychological irritant that Castro and his successors represented to American policymakers.

To this day, the last surviving exile brigade, Alpha 66, still stands at the ready, waiting in Miami for the call to support a rebel uprising in their homeland. Messrs. Houghton and Driggs strike an elegiac note about the members of Alpha 66: "They are tragic figures, quixotic warriors whose lives were uprooted by forces beyond their control, forever grasping for something beyond their reach. And they, more than most, are one of the most powerful and lasting distillations of the Cold War experience that has shaped Miami."

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—Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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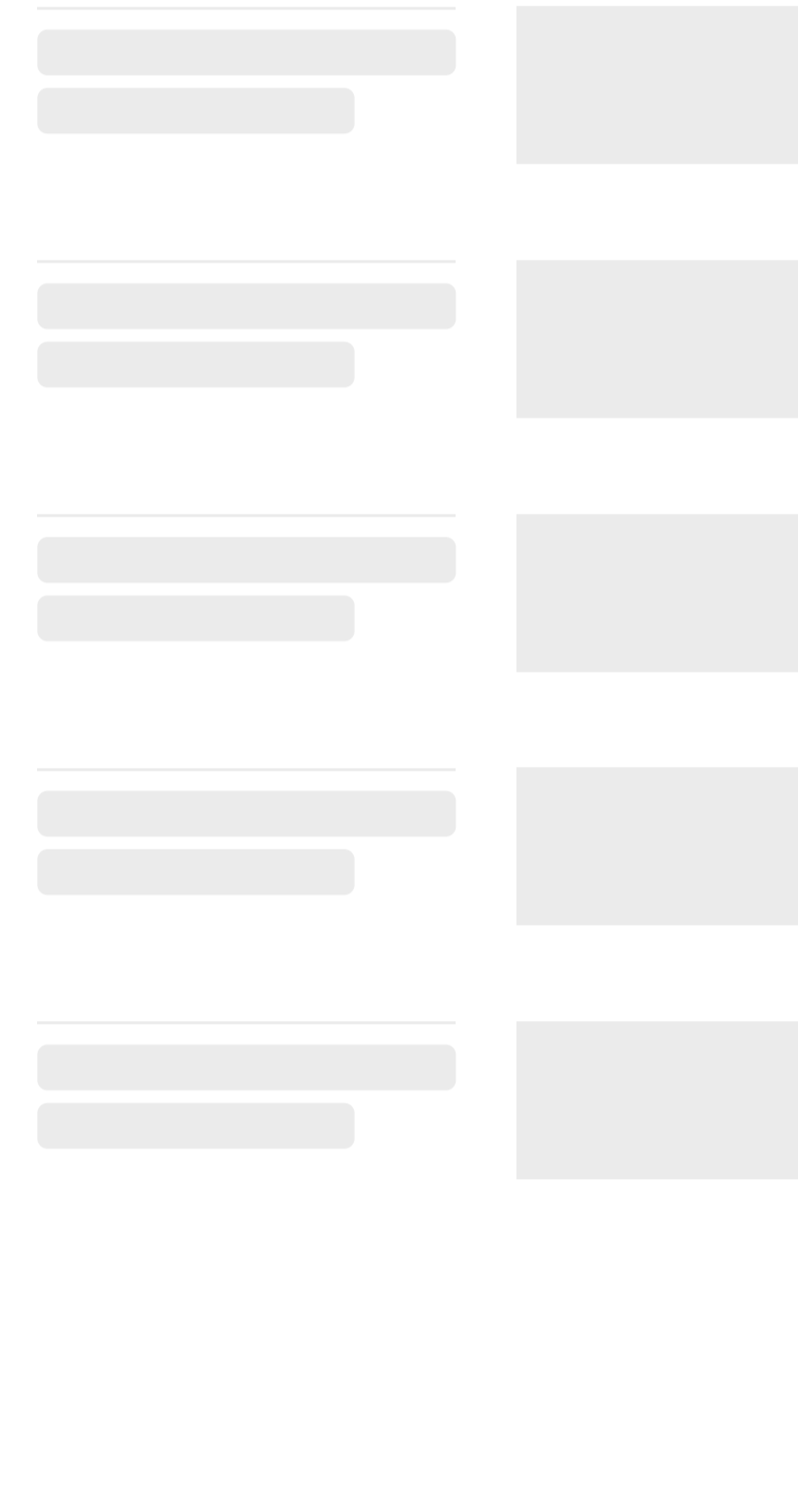
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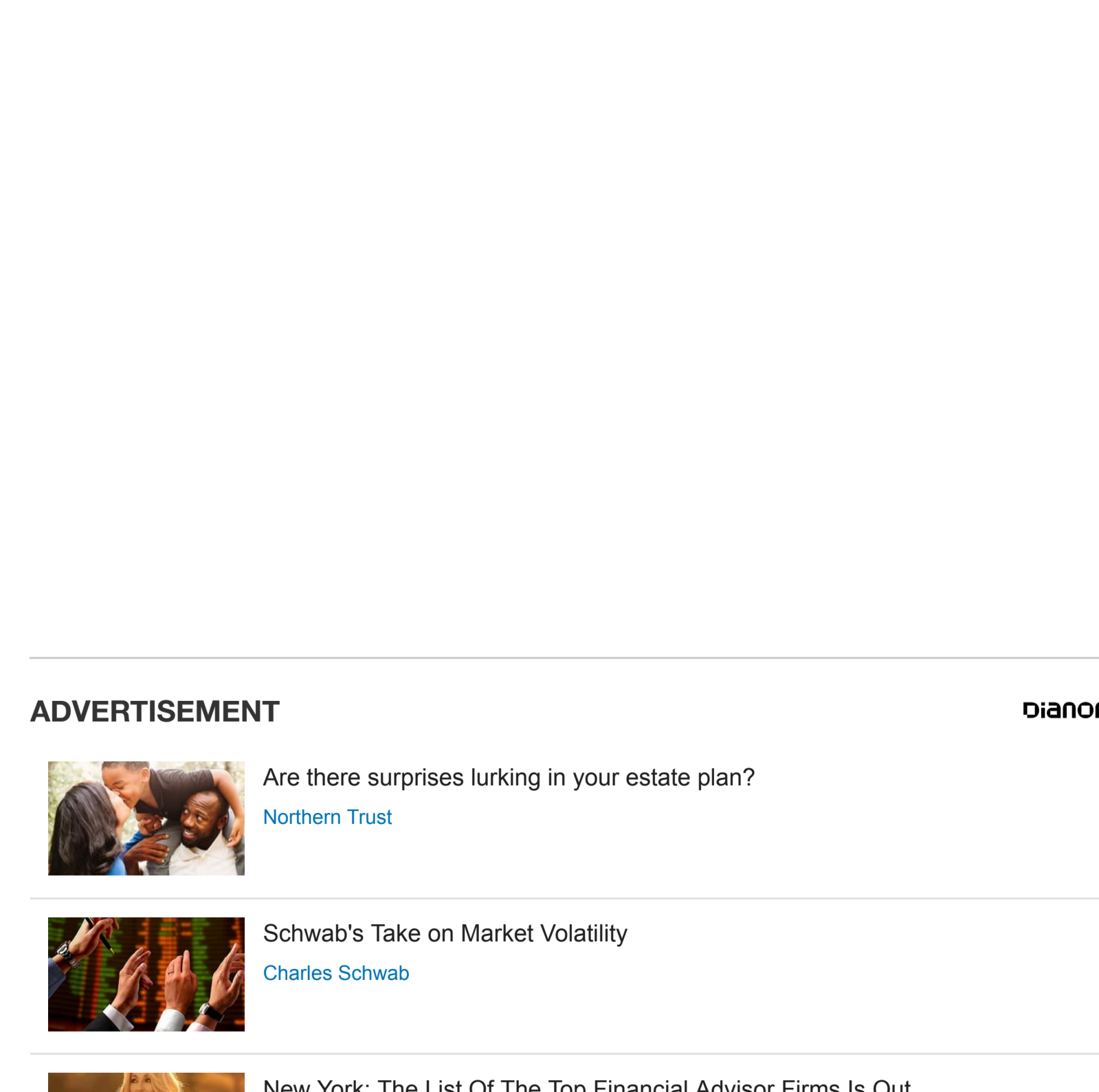
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