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An Insurance Policy For Peace

WHAT POSES the greatest risk of nuclear war in the years ahead?

The answer offered in a study by the Central Intelligence Agency is, we think, correct — namely, a miscalculation by Soviet leaders of the U.S. will to resist in a crisis.

The point closely parallels one made by David Lawrence today in his editorial page column analyzing the causes of World War II. Appeasement and vacillation by the United States and Hitler's European neighbors emboldened the Nazi leader to take the reckless steps that produced a world bloodbath.

The CIA study, prepared by Willard Matthias of the CIA Board of National Estimates, notes that deterrence is the key. It is our best insurance against war. This means that, in addition to prodigious nuclear might, a nation must manifest unmistakably a determination to use its power if pushed too far.

The Matthias study gives a good example in reverse — how the United States, by seeming to be afraid of a confrontation, set the stage for the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Says the CIA paper:

"In the international atmosphere of early 1962, when the Cuban move was planned, the Soviet leaders were still riding high and the United States probably appeared to them to be uncertain and cautious.

"The United States had chosen not to run the political risks necessary to

save the Bay of Pigs expedition. The United States had accepted the erection of the Berlin Wall with little more than verbal pyrotechnics. And the United States had accepted the neutralist solution in Laos.

"Formal U.S. statements regarding Cuba conveyed an air of studied uncertainty.

"In military planning, despite substantially increased programs of missile deployment, the United States was advocating a greater conventional capability and a counter-insurgency program.

"Thus, it probably appeared to the Soviets that the diplomatic and military stance of the United States was that of a power seeking to avoid confrontation and fearful of its consequences, and therefore a power which could be subjected to a series of setbacks without high risks of forceful resistance."

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THE SOVIETS, of course, badly misjudged our determination in 1962. We meant business and we proved it.

However, this has not stopped further probing by the Soviets or other Communist adversaries, as the complex situation in Southeast Asia illustrates. Our show of toughness in Cuba in 1962 stands us in good stead — but only temporarily. There are now other places and other circumstances where our enemies could misread our will power.

And that, as the saying goes, could be the ball game.