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The production of hard Cuba
information in the fall of 1962.

INTELLIGENCE IN THE MISSILE CRISIS

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¹
Excerpted from the author's presentation to the Intelligence Methods Conference. 

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It was the fall of 1962, an election year, and a silver-haired senator of the opposition was taxing the administration with its failure to "do something" in light of all the reports he had about Soviet missiles in Cuba. Asked about this at a news conference, President Kennedy responded, "... To persuade our allies to come with us, to hazard ... the security ... as well as the peace of the free world, we have to move with hard intelligence."

How the President was provided with hard intelligence throughout those fateful October days is the subject of this paper. The most conspicuous element in that intelligence, the dramatic U-2 and low-level photography, has long enjoyed the good press it deserves; I wish rather to highlight some other kinds of action taken by the intelligence community to meet the extraordinary demands of the President and his advisers.

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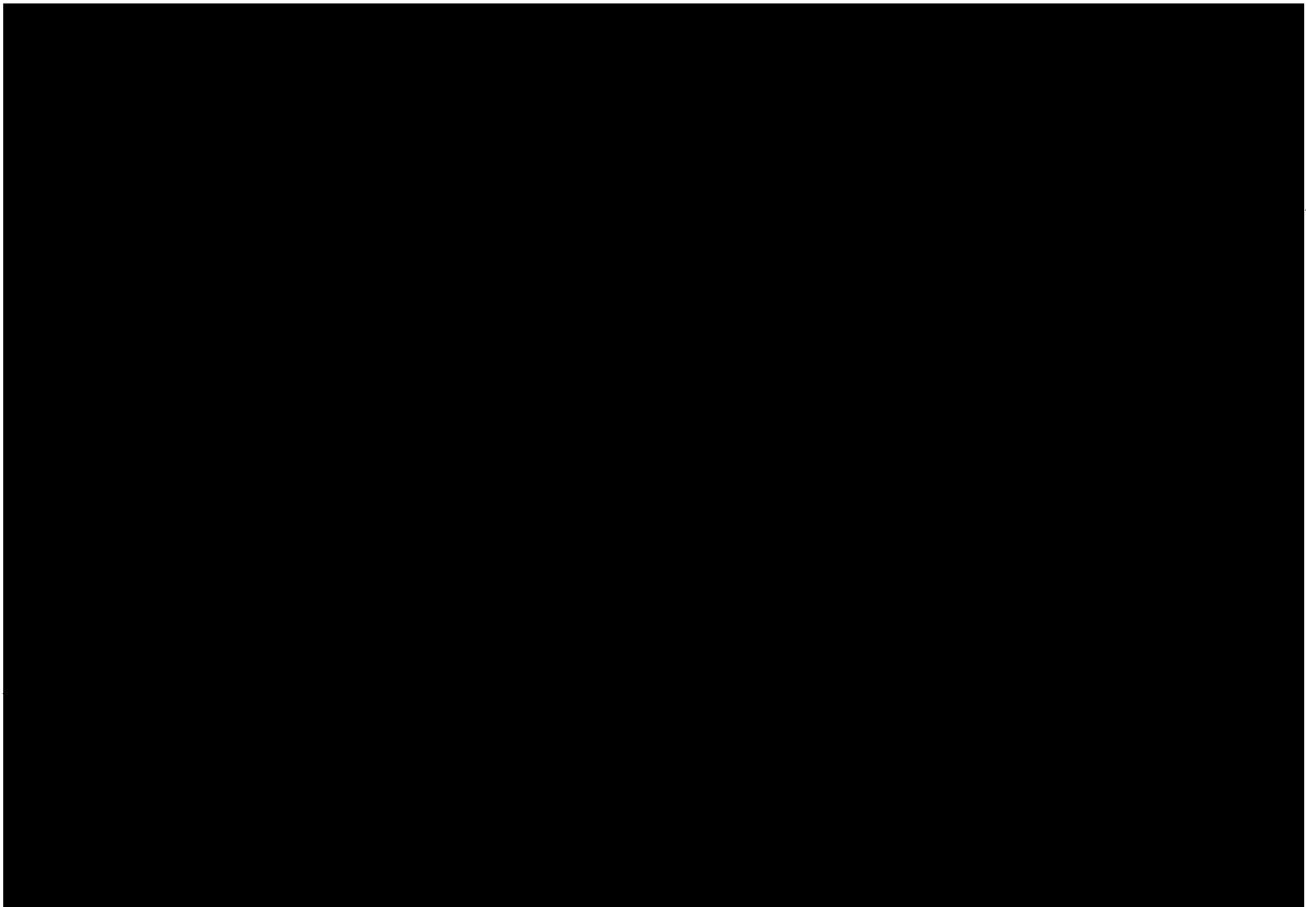
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Foundation Work

In the first place, the events of September and October 1962 did not burst upon an intelligence community only dimly aware of Cuba and the problems it posed. In a way, the community had without realizing it been gearing itself since late 1961 for the crisis. Under directives from Mr. McCone, the

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The increases in the collection of information were matched by developmentsⁱⁿ intelligence-producing offices. In CIA, for example, a Cuba Branch was established in the economic research

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organization, and the Latin American Branch of the geographic research element began to concentrate almost all its effort on Cuba. FBIS expanded its coverage of Cuban radio broadcasts and began to issue periodic analyses of them. The NPIC assigned more interpreters to work on Cuban photographs. And in March of 1962 the CIA Office of Current Intelligence began to publish a Daily Summary devoted entirely to Cuba. This summary, containing information of all classifications, was designed to bring persons working directly on Cuban matters all pertinent information. In the beginning it thus had a rather restricted audience, but the number of people immediately involved in Cuban matters was soon to swell.

The buildup of analytical capabilities just barely kept pace with the influx of information. One of the problems that kept coming unsolved throughout the pre-crisis period was how to cope with the vast volume of reporting.

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By August an increasing proportion of this reporting referred to military cargoes being unloaded under conditions of security and to the arrival of large numbers of Soviet

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personnel. The preparation of a special national intelligence estimate on the military buildup was ordered. The estimate concluded, in brief, that the main purpose of the buildup was to strengthen the Castro regime against any attempt by the United States to overthrow it. The establishment of a strategic missile or submarine base there was judged incompatible with Soviet past practice and present policy.⁴ This

⁴See Sherman Kent's "A Crucial Estimate Relived," Studies VIII 2 p. 1 ff.

estimate, endorsed by the USIB on 19 September, represented a genuine consensus of the community. The SA-2s, the coastal defense cruise missiles, and the MIG-21s seemed to indicate only a Soviet intent to give Castro a formidable defensive capability.

As it happened, the research and analytical work for the estimate was going on at the very time that the first MRBM units were arriving in Cuba. Yet although a few ground observer reports were received after mid-September that in retrospect appear to speak of offensive missiles, there was nothing between the USIB meeting on 19 September and the 14 October photography of San Cristobal that clearly and unequivocally called for reversing this judgment. What ominous reports did come in had, as Mr. Kent has written, other "egress to the world of policy

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people. ... The information was current intelligence when it came in and it promptly went out to the key customers as such."

Crisis Reporting

This brings us to the matter of providing current intelligence in the crisis period proper. Now all the intelligence staffs and instrumentalities in Washington organized themselves to do one thing before all others -- provide the fastest possible processing, assessment, and publication of intelligence related to the problems of the President. As current as the intelligence was, it was never current enough. Every way was sought to minimize the time between the arrival of information in Washington and its presentation--in meaningful form and with judgment--to the President and his advisers. One of the fastest shows in town throughout this period was that of NPIC and of its peripatetic director, Art Lundahl, as he shuttled back and forth from his office to the White House, the State Department, and USIB meetings, briefing on the results of the latest photography.

The prescient Mr. McCone, who had suspected strategic missiles from the first days of the arms buildup, called on 16 October for a single special publication to provide him with all current information pertinent to the crisis. This

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meant not only military developments in Cuba and the status of Soviet shipping to the island but also Soviet political and diplomatic developments, the status of Soviet military forces in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, other developments in Cuba, and world reactions to the events taking place. This comprehensive work had to be ready by seven o'clock each morning, in time to prepare the DCI for the 8:30 meeting of the USIB and the ten- o'clock meeting of the Executive Committee at the White House.

The resulting Cuban Crisis Memorandum, begun on 17 October, was issued at least once a day, sometimes twice, for about six weeks. It contained information current as of six o'clock in the morning, normally including highlights of the photography taken the day before.

Two subjects were of especially great importance in the first two weeks of the crisis--the status of Soviet shipping and the status of the strategic weapons in Cuba. CIA established a situation room manned around the clock to bring its analysts concerned with current reporting on these two subjects together, accessible to each other and to others needing the information. It was out of this situation room that much of the material for the Cuban Crisis Memorandum

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was pulled together, starting about four in the morning to meet the seven- o'clock deadline.

Current Analysis

Soviet shipping and the operation of the U.S. quarantine were the reporting responsibility of what Mr. McCone called "my shipping central"--a task force of economic analysts which moved into the OCE situation room and worked in close cooperation with the Pentagon to maintain continuing surveillance of Soviet shipping,

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photography, along-side inspection by U.S. naval units, low-level photography and inspection by U.S. military aircraft supporting the quarantine, and whatever other information might help determine the cargo of the suspect ships.⁵ As

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It was one of the analysts on this task force who first alerted the community to the fact that the Soviet ships heading for Cuba had turned around after the President's speech of 22 October. There is a story behind this success. In the spring of 1962, an expensive automated system to account for Soviet ship movements had been set up in Washington. The crisis was obviously a test for it; the Soviet reaction to the U.S. blockade was crucial to the further U.S. course of action. The computer, however, spewing forth reams of data on Soviet ships' operations and positions, told nothing about the direction of their movement. It was an experienced lady analyst, working with the dog-eared 5x8 cards she had been using for years, who first noted that the key Soviet ships now were headed east and north not west and south.

For the essential joint analysis of the status of Soviet offensive systems in Cuba, an unusual arrangement was made: two interagency committees began to sit in concert practically 24 hours a day. The Guided Missile and Astronautics Intelligence Committee and the Joint Atomic Energy Intelligence Committee took up residence together in the downtown work space of NPIC. Beginning on 18 October, the two committees would work throughout the night, reviewing each day's photography as it came direct from the photo interpreters next

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door and preparing a joint evaluation of the state of the weapons in Cuba. This report also went to the Director in time for his morning meetings, in addition to being summarized in the 'Cuban Crisis Memorandum prepared concurrently in Langley. There was an extraordinary amount of hurried travel back and forth between NPIC, the Pentagon, and CIA headquarters in the small hours of the night as people strove to meet the deadlines.

The joint meetings of GMAIC and JAEIC brought in not only the regular members but also advisory personnel from outfits like the Army Missile Command and specialists in such matters as Soviet merchant shipping. In the early days of the crisis, just before and after the President's speech, the main focus was on the readiness of the missile sites to fire and the availability of nuclear warheads. When the withdrawal phase began, it shifted to substantiating the actual evacuation of the missiles and their supporting equipment. The committees ended their excursion into the production of current intelligence on 11 November, after meeting nightly for over three weeks and issuing 22 reports.

After Effects

One of the unique features of the daily Cuban Crisis Memorandum resulted from Mr. McCone's wish to have all the

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information the President and the Executive Committee ought to have, including information on U.S. military dispositions and actions pertinent to the Cuban and Soviet developments. Under the pressure of the times the operations and planning parts of the Pentagon were persuaded to make more information available to intelligence than they ever had before, at least on a regular basis. This was the beginning of a trend in the preparation of senior-level intelligence publications that continues today.


Many of the activities begun during the crisis ended when it ended. The all-night joint meetings no longer were necessary, the situation room wasn't needed 24 hours a day, the special daily reports could turn their job over to the regular publications. Gradually most of the ad hoc machinery of the crisis period was put away, but not all. The intelligence collection resources were charged with monitoring Soviet fulfillment of the withdrawal agreement. Castro's refusal to permit a United Nations on-site inspection meant that U.S. overflights would continue. Agent and refugee reporting would continue. When the missiles and IL-28s were gone, attention was concentrated on the other Soviet forces and equipment -- how the Cubans were slowly trained in the operation of the SAMs, MIG-21s, and Komar boats and given control of them.

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Right up to today, Cuban reporting continues to receive special attention. Reports of missiles or missile-related activity continue to come in through a variety of sources, mostly exiles and agents in Cuba. Now, as then, these reports

25X1X48 are carefully checked against shipping information and the

 I don't think anyone expects the Soviets, having been once burned, to be twice foolish, but then we didn't expect them to be once foolish either.

The words of President Kennedy in mid-December of 1962 as he reflected on the crisis speak to one of the lessons of the times:

I think, looking back on Cuba, what is of concern is the fact that both governments were so far out of contact, really. I don't think that we expected that [Khrushchev] would put the missiles in Cuba, because it would have seemed such an imprudent action for him to take, as it was later proved. Now, he obviously must have thought that he could do it in secret and that the United States would accept it. So that he did not judge our intentions accurately.

Of lessons more particularly for intelligence, one is the importance of helping analysts working with one part of a problem communicate with those working in related areas. In this instance the shipping analysts had information of import to those concerned with military and political matters,

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and the timely sharing of this information was vital. A more difficult kind of separation to overcome is that that divides the analyst from the intelligence collector, especially where new collection systems or highly sensitive sources are involved. At times it almost seems--to the analyst, at least--that the collector regards collection as an end in itself. It isn't, of course, and this kind of obstacle is the mutual problem of the collector and the analyst.

Another lesson is the need for great procedural flexibility in time of crisis. Our normal organization is designed to do a complete job within normal deadlines. Doing it, we add to our fund of knowledge and expertise. But this normal organization is rarely well suited to the kinds of actions necessary in a crisis. Nor are plans for crisis management drawn up in advance usually of much help. The crisis imposes its own shape, its own schedules, its own questions, and its own answers. In short, the intelligence manager best prepares for crisis by filling up the fund of knowledge and ability when he can and by using it as efficiently and as imaginatively as he knows how when the crisis breaks.

Finally, let me return to President Kennedy's statement that "we have to move with hard intelligence." The U.S. government was able to act with precision and certainty in

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this crisis because at the crucial stage its intelligence on military developments in Cuba and elsewhere was hard. Some have interpreted this to mean photographic evidence. I believe this exaggerates the role of photography in intelligence reporting, important as it is. I believe that one lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is the indispensability of using all sources, human and technical, and all techniques and methodologies to achieve hard intelligence. If there is one lesson we should have learned by now, it is the danger of single-source intelligence, no matter what the surface promise of that source may be.

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