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Is Castro Convertible?

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, April 22 — The C.I.A. has come up with an exciting, modern method of briefing President Reagan about foreign leaders: the motion picture. Before a visit to the U.S. by Israel's Menachem Begin, the C.I.A. produced a psychological profile in the form of a film documentary for the President's top-secret viewing that was the pride of the agency's film division.

Mr. Reagan finds going to the secret movies preferable to slogging through turgid written intelligence reports. After the socko success of the Begin film at the Oval Box Office, Cloak and Dagger Productions came up with an even bigger hit.

The 20-minute selected short subject that drew raves last month from elite audiences at the White House and State is a search inside the mind of Fidel Castro, which takes the point of view that he may be going through a political menopause; it suggests that a mid-life crisis of the Cuban leader, now 54, offers us an opportunity to woo him away from the Soviet orbit.

Evidence exists that Secretary Haig has been trying to steal that demarche. Five months ago he met secretly with the Cuban Vice President in Mexico; that de facto recognition led to a follow-up visit to Havana by the silent-mission specialist Vernon Walters. (There was a rumor that Mr. Haig slipped away over a weekend in March for a rendezvous with Cuban officials, but he flatly denies that.)

The Reagan Administration may be deluding itself. In 1978 the Carter Administration became aware of violations of the 1962 agreement with the Soviet Union that prohibited the installation of offensive weapons in Cuba. Instead of demanding the withdrawal of MIG-23's with the capability of bombing Houston, Mr. Carter wrote to Leonid Brezhnev stating only that further shipments would be considered a violation. They stopped. During the Reagan Administration, the shipments began again.

That quiet buildup was soon accompanied by an open warning from Mr. Brezhnev that any attempt by the U.S. to counter new Soviet missiles in Europe would be followed by an escalation of Soviet power near the U.S. — which means missiles in Cuba.

Alarmed by the apparent weakness of the Reagan response, and made suspicious by five cancellations since February of scheduled Haig testimony about Cuban policy, hard-line senators led by the Republican Steve Symms of Idaho introduced a resolution reaffirming the 1962 Kennedy-

partment weaseled. "We do not find the Symms restatement resolution helpful to our overall efforts in that region now," a State functionary informed Howard Baker, the majority leader, who then dutifully broke a tie vote and supported the weasel.

Despite all the tough talk by the President this month about a Soviet-Cuban "virus" threatening the Caribbean, when it came to a simple reaffirmation of our 20-year understanding that we will not tolerate offensive weapons in Cuba, the Reagan Administration waffled.

Why? Perhaps a vote for the 1962 agreement would expose the degree to which that agreement is being violated. Perhaps, at the other extreme, an attack on Cuba is being planned that would also violate the agreement. Or perhaps some timorous jerk down the line at State, without checking upstairs, instructed the majority leader of the Senate to make a fool of himself.

The unofficial line at State today supports — even promotes — the timorous-jerk theory. Senators are being told that when the resolution comes up again next month, the Administration will support it. All the waffling last week was a terrible mistake, the Reagan men say, and point to the hasty cutoff of tourist trade with Cuba as proof of toughness on Mr. Castro. Where was our efficient national security adviser in this uncoordinated mess? Out to lunch.

Something is fishy about all that. It could be that some competitive wooing of Mr. Castro was going on, and we turned out to be the rejected suitor. When the Argentines asked their big grain customer, the Soviet Union, to veto the United Nations resolution calling for a pullout from the Falklands, it asked for assurances that the Argentines in return would not join a U.S.-organized move against Cuba. The Argentines had no answer and so Moscow abstained, showing that its priority in Latin America is still its ally, Cuba.

Let us hope that our behind-the-scenes flirtation with Mr. Castro is over. For him there is no role reversal, despite fanciful C.I.A. movies to the contrary.

Men high in Reagan circles murmur about carrots and sticks; now that the carrot has not worked, what is left? Our 1962 agreement is being steadily eroded, and we are on notice from the Kremlin that intermediate-range missiles will soon be near our shores.

Future memoirs, in four volumes, will prove that we gave peaceful initiatives every chance. Now is the time