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The Mystery Flash: Bomb or Phenomenon?

Although it happened almost a year ago, the mysterious flash detected off the coast of South Africa by a U.S. spy satellite is still a matter of dispute among intelligence experts.

The Defense Intelligence Agency, as might be expected from its military orientation, is convinced the mysterious flash was a nuclear explosion of some sort. Navy experts agree with the DIA's conclusion.

On the other hand, a White House panel of experts from the Office of Science and Technology hashed over the admittedly scanty evidence and decided the most likely explanation was that the flash was a natural phenomenon—in other words, a mystery.

A closely guarded Central Intelligence Agency report comes down almost in the middle of these two divergent assessments. It gives the edge to DIA and the Navy: The flash detected by the orbiting spy satellite was "most likely" a nuclear explosion, though it possibly could have been nothing more ominous than a gigantic lightning bolt or other natural occurrence.

As I reported earlier, the CIA has suspected for years that both South Africa and Israel have the capability to produce nuclear weapons. The CIA thinks it quite possible that the two nations are collaborating on the development of nuclear devices, and have been working on this with still a third beleaguered nation—Taiwan.

What the CIA experts think most probably happened, according to the secret report, is that the South Africa-Israel-Taiwan trio tested a relatively small-scale, tactical nuclear weapon,

about one-sixth the size of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima 35 years ago.

The advantage of tactical nukes to the three nations, as intelligence experts see it, is that they could be used for limited, defensive purposes to forestall invasion from aggressive neighbors without inviting massive retaliation from the nuclear superpowers. Taiwan, for example, could repel an attack from Red China by detonating tactical nuclear devices in the Strait of Formosa without blasting the Chinese mainland and touching off a holocaust.

While this relatively moderate use of nuclear weapons is reassuring, U.S. intelligence agencies do not overlook the ominous possibility that the small, tactical nuclear devices might be more tempting to use simply because they are less destructive. Once nuclear weaponry was used even on a limited scale, it might be impossible to stop a chain reaction.

In its secret report to the National Security Council, dated June 20, 1980, the CIA raised the distinct possibility that the "mystery flash" of September 1979, was part of a tactical nuclear weapon test in the joint South Africa-Israel-Taiwan program.

If that's what it was, the CIA reported, technical improvements needed to make the device ready for combat use could be expected "by late 1980 or early 1981."