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U.S. Steps Up Cuba Surveillance

The uproar over the Soviet "combat brigade" in Cuba last fall has been supplanted in the headlines by Iran and Afghanistan, but the short-lived Cuban crisis brought a dramatic reordering of priorities in the U.S. intelligence community.

Cuba has now replaced China as the target of our second most intensive intelligence efforts—second only to the Soviet Union. From the status of "low priority attention," the Marxist-ruled island 90 miles off the Florida coast has risen in the intelligence community's estimation as an area worthy of concentrated and massive surveillance.

"If a rabbit moves on that place, we know about it." So a Central Intelligence Agency source described the new emphasis on Cuba to my associate Dale Van Atta. While this sounds like hyperbole, it's not all that farfetched: The satellites that have been committed to spying on Cuba since the Soviet brigade fiasco can take clear pictures of a one-foot object from 100 miles up in the stratosphere.

The administration is clearly not going to be caught napping on Cuban developments again. Briefings by the CIA are made on an almost everyday basis. As a CIA source put it, "Cuba gets an intelligence enema every three days."

A series of "Top Secret Umbra" reports from the summer of 1979 to February 1980 shows the detail with which U.S. intelligence agencies have been alerting the administration to the dangers from Russia's Caribbean colony. Much of the information focuses on Cienfuegos, on the southern coast of Cuba, where Fidel Castro has been

modernizing a key naval and air base:

- A 1979 Defense Intelligence Agency report predicts that the Russians may send a detachment of Backfire nuclear bombers into Cuba in 1980. Runways at the Cienfuegos airfield are being lengthened to 9,000 feet—the distance required for the Backfire—and there are already two airfields in Cuba that could handle the Soviet plane.

- From bases in Cuba, Soviet Backfires could hit virtually any target in the United States. What alarms our military experts is that present defenses against bomber raids are aimed toward the north (against Soviet missiles coming over the North Pole) and on each seacoast (against submarine-launched missiles), leaving the nation's southeastern defenses relatively naked.

- Spy satellites have spotted a suspicious-looking building at Punta Movida, near Cienfuegos. It closely resembles the kind of structure used in Eastern Europe for storage and maintenance of nuclear missiles. Punta Movida is also being connected by a railroad, which raises the possibility that nuclear submarines could be serviced at the huge shed.

Some intelligence analysts, however, have cautioned that everything turned up by the spies-in-the-sky is consistent with a nuclear power plant the Cubans are building with Soviet help in the Cienfuegos area. And these experts note that there have been "no indications that Havana has plans for nuclear weapons."

On the other hand, some intelligence reports express concern that the CIA may be ignoring evidence

that Castro plans to use the Soviet-sponsored nuclear technology for military purposes.

- The secret intelligence reports show that the Russians have been upgrading their communications equipment in Cuba in recent years. One communications satellite facility, according to a "Top Secret Umbra" National Security Agency report, permits nearly simultaneous two-way exchanges between Havana and the Soviet defense ministry's main intelligence office. According to the report: "Havana serves as a communications relay center for the [Kremlin] to support its intelligence operations throughout the Western Hemisphere."

The intelligence reports indicate that the Soviets may not have yet breached the secret agreements they signed with the United States following the Cuban military crisis in 1962 — but they're coming dangerously close.