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The Bears in Cuba

An early warning signal has been flashed to President Reagan that defense-oriented senators, many of them solid Reaganites, will break their self-imposed silence and demand decisive U.S. action against the Soviet arms buildup in Cuba, using a political backdrop that could embarrass the president.

That backdrop is the drama of President John F. Kennedy's spectacular success in backing down the Soviet Union in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. What gives piquancy to the demand for action is the new disclosure that Cuban airfields now operate as a base for the Soviet TU95 heavy bomber called the Bear—far superior to the IL28 that Kennedy insisted be withdrawn.

Despite the rising demand for action by an administration that has been talking tough on Cuba and the Caribbean for a full year, but carrying a small stick, the consensus within Reagan's national security bureaucracy was described to us this way: "We all agree the Soviets are developing a fantastic strategic opportunity." But as for the U.S. counter-action, well, let's see what happens.

Twenty years ago, when the United States still held an unequivocal military margin over the Soviets, Kennedy extended the missile crisis beyond mere Soviet agreement to pull out the medium-range missiles surreptitiously unloaded on Cuban wharfs. He insisted, also, on the withdrawal of the Cuban-based IL28s.

Congressional agitation has been rising for months over U.S. intelligence reports that Soviet weapons have been piling up in Fidel Castro's Cuba. But the latest intelligence added a new dimension: Cuban-based TU95s, the aircraft classified in the SALT II treaty as the primary Soviet heavy bomber, have been engaged in reconnaissance flights against U.S. naval vessels along the Atlantic Coast for the first time. The Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee that oversees Latin America and the Caribbean has asked State Department officials to give it details and documents of the 1962 agreements (that resolved the missile crisis) between John J. McCloy, representing the United States, and Vasily Kuznetsov, then a high-ranking official in the Soviet Foreign Office.

The subcommittee, headed by Sen. Jesse Helms, means business, but the State Department is exhibiting signs of wariness. Senate insiders say the administration does not want to reveal the fine print of the written and oral undertakings by the Soviets in the so-called "McCloy-Kuznetsov agreements." A closed-door session scheduled for this week was postponed for at least another week.

Rising Senate agitation is based on the suspicion, now nearing conviction, that the McCloy-Kuznetsov agreements have been torn to shreds by Moscow. The essence of those agreements was an

embargo on "offensive" weapons in Cuba that could be used either against the United States or in Cuban political manipulations against Central America or elsewhere in the Caribbean.

Assuming the accuracy of American intelligence, the presence of Soviet Bear bombers on any one of nine different airfields equipped to handle them amounts to a quantum jump in proliferation of more ambiguous Soviet weapons. Crates recently unloaded from Soviet vessels are acknowledged to contain MiG23s, a late-model Soviet fighter that has been present in Cuba for many months. Some specialists, however, believe they may contain the bomber version of the MiG23, known as the MiG27, which would also appear to be a clear violation of the 1962 agreement.

Administration officials correctly fear that the coming Senate probe points to far more difficulties for the president than merely identifying Castro's most recent Soviet acquisitions. The true target is the president's curious lassitude in adopting a consistent policy to deal with Cuba's central role in spreading Marxist revolution or civil war throughout Central America.

What the senators are after is candid, public recitation of the extent and significance of the Soviet arms shipments, their use by Cuba and what the Reagan administration is going to do about it. It may be a lot more than they get.

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