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The Nonexistent MiGs

When anonymous background briefers were rattling us with "credible evidence" that the Soviets were shipping MiG jet fighters to Nicaragua, the specter of another Cuban missile crisis came quickly to mind. The MiGs apparently not having materialized, a better analogue becomes the spurious scare over a "Soviet brigade" in Cuba in 1979.

Analogies are never perfect. But in crucial respects having to do with crisis management—Who's in charge? Who can be trusted?—you can find in these two seemingly disparate episodes significant common elements: calculated leaks of half-baked intelligence reports; publicly stated administration purposes put at risk by irresponsible ideologues within its ranks; the potential (real in the case of the "brigade," so far only potential in the case of the MiGs) for serious consequences for U.S.-Soviet relations.

I am taking it on faith that the leaks in the matter of the Nicaraguan MiGs were not authorized. White House officials insist this is so. Secretary of State George Shultz sounded like he meant it when he said the leakers "engaged in a criminal act." Unless the president is engaging in a monumental subterfuge, no large purpose of his could be served by leaking unsubstantiated intelligence reports calculated to inflame suspicion of the Soviet Union at a time when he is proclaiming improved relations in general and arms control negotiations in particular to be his highest priority.

But official disclaimers of high-level responsibility are no comfort. On the contrary, they confirm the state of disorder in the administration's foreign policy making that robbed the president's first term of clear purpose and single voice on critical issues having to do with East-West relations, and threatens to do the same the second time around.

That's what makes Jimmy Carter's experience in 1979 instructive. He had negotiated the SALT II arms control agreement with the Soviets and

wanted Senate approval. The last thing he needed was a trumped-up crisis threatening to shatter congressional confidence in Soviet reliability. But his administration, like Reagan's today, was in disarray, sharply divided between soft-liners and hard-liners.

"Linkage" was the hard-liners' strategy of choice: arms control was to be held hostage to Soviet performance across the board, and the Soviets' Cuban surrogates were making big trouble in Africa. The Soviet-Cuban connection was under intense scrutiny. When intelligence "discovered" what looked like a new and menacing Soviet military presence in Cuba, the diplomats quietly tried to work it out with Moscow. But the hard-liners were quick to sound the alarm.

Confidential briefings included key members of Congress, notably the late Sen. Frank Church, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, who

was under intense conservative attack in his race for reelection. He was quick to state the "linkage" publicly: SALT II could not be ratified until the Soviets withdrew their combat unit from Cuba.

Critics of SALT II were as quick to take up the cry. An exhaustive intelligence effort demonstrated that the Soviet brigade had been in Cuba for some 17 years (a fact known to four previous administrations). But by that time the damage had been done. The Carter administration reluctantly put off Senate consideration of the SALT II treaty until 1980, when it was knocked dead by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In May of that year, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko told newly installed Secretary of State Edmund Muskie he would never believe that the Carter administration had not cooked up

the crisis over the Soviet brigade as an act of bad faith, by way of renegeing on SALT II. That's the point: the Soviets are not all that sophisticated about the freewheeling workings of the U.S. government, accustomed as they are to a certain discipline in their own.

One can only guess what Gromyko is now making of Ronald Reagan's second-term intentions. But if the Carter experience is any guide, he will be reading dark motives into the sudden explosion of concern over nonexistent MiGs, even though it has now dissipated into a more generalized concern about the buildup of Soviet arms aid to Nicaragua.

The question is not whether the administration is justified in the latter concern. It is whether the administration intends to play fast and loose with "linkage"—tying revived arms-control negotiations to exaggerated claims about Soviet arms shipments to Nicaragua. The administration is supposedly taking a fresh look at everything. It could be there is no firm policy. But history tells us it is at just such junctures that the ideologues in a divided administration tend to strike.

If the "crisis" of the MiGs is behind us, the management questions it raises are not. They will not be answered until there is some better explanation of how and why the whole thing blew up in the first place—and what this says about Reagan's capacities for command and control.