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WHO SETS FOREIGN POLICY, VANCE OR BRZEZINSKI?

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The argument over Cuba's role in the invasion of Zaire's Shaba province is one that the State Department of Cyrus R. Vance wanted to avoid. It was uncertain of the evidence.

But Zbigniew Brzezinski's National Security Council seized the available evidence and propelled President Carter into the controversy. The result has been questioning of the president's credibility.

This continuing case is the latest example of the difference between the two main units of government dealing with foreign affairs — and between the two men who shape their outlooks and activities.

It is also another piece of an answer to one of Washington's most discussed, long-standing questions: Who makes foreign policy in the Carter administration?

This piece of the answer gives the impression that Brzezinski, an aggressive national security adviser seeking to make a stand against Soviet power to show United States strength and determination, is more influential than the less pushy Vance, who does not suffer from this apparent national inferiority complex.

The situation is more complex than that, naturally. The State Department and the NSC have the different functions of managing the civilian side of foreign relations and of supervising a wider range of security interests, including military aspects.

In many ways Jimmy Carter makes foreign policy himself with the help not only of Vance and Brzezinski but also of Defense Secretary Harold Brown, CIA Director Stansfield Turner, U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young and others.

THE PRESIDENT LISTENS to them all. This, of course, sometimes produces seemingly ambiguous results. The unclear signal of Carter's recent Annapolis speech on U.S.-Soviet relations, an address that reflected his advisers' differences on Soviet affairs, is but one example.

But, more than his other advisers on foreign policy, Carter listens to Brzezinski. While others get a chance to discuss major decisions with the

president, it is Brzezinski whose job gives him the opportunity to put his own foreign policy attitudes before the president many times a day.

Also, his position in the White House's West Wing gives him a chance to float ideas that have major impact on the public perception of foreign policy. There is a tendency in the press and the nation to pay more attention to statements or "leaks" from the White House than from the State Department.

In instances traceable to Brzezinski, however, these ideas sometimes seem not to have been thought through very carefully. Brzezinski has shown a tendency to take public positions on policy questions without the careful staff study that usually marks State Department pronouncements.

The difference is a reflection both of the personal contrasts between Vance and Brzezinski and the distinctions between the institutions they head. They are differences that inevitably give rise to comparisons that are controversial — and are poisoned by recent history.

IT IS THE HISTORY of Henry A. Kissinger as national security adviser and William P. Rogers as secretary of state in the Nixon administration.

One was a naturalized American with a background of academic aggrandizement, the other a native lawyer with a more relaxed approach to life. The hard-driving Kissinger used the NSC base to eclipse Rogers, and eventually to drive him out of the secretary of state job and to take it over.

The same differences in backgrounds between Vance and Brzezinski have fueled speculation about competition.

For almost a year and a half the two men have been trying to avoid or ignore such speculation. It will not die, especially with new cases like Shaba refueling it periodically.

Vance, 61, is a pillar of the American establishment — the product of Yale, the Navy in World War II, a leading New York law firm, important government jobs since 1957. It is the kind of background that produces a self-confident official with a pragmatic approach to problems, a lawyer's willingness to find a compromise solution.

Brzezinski, 50, is the outsider who hustled his way into the establish-

ment from the academic world. He brought as intellectual baggage a hostility toward Russia — not just the current Soviet state, but the Russians who had oppressed his native Poland for generations — that has produced a more ideological approach to world problems, a suspicion of compromise.

VANCE IS A MILD, sometimes shy man. He did not need to develop the combative instincts of one who has had to fight his way to the top. He tends to react with slow, precise cautiousness to situations.

When Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko emerged three weeks ago from a meeting with Carter at the White House, he told reporters that the president's information on Cuban involvement in Shaba was not correct. Vance stood listening with his usual polite smile on his face.

It was not until three hours later that he told reporters, in Gromyko's presence, that "I feel I must take exception. . . . The president is fully and accurately informed."

Brzezinski, on the other hand, is quick to assert himself. He tends to sound off without careful consideration of his remarks.

When border fighting between Vietnam and Cambodia escalated in January, Brzezinski told interviewers that it was "the first case of a proxy war between China and the Soviet Union." Officials who had paid attention to the Indochinese situation privately denied that it qualified as a proxy war.

Some officials suggested that Brzezinski's comment showed a tendency to interpret too many world events in terms of U.S.-Soviet confrontation. This suggestion is now being heard again in the Shaba case.

Brzezinski critics, who are numerous despite his years as an academic acolyte of the native-born establishment, see him as a man with a limited set of ideas that he developed early in his career and now keeps recycling. Vance, who epitomizes the establishment with its old-school ties, is seen generally as being more open-minded to new ideas, less assured that he already knows most of the answers.

BEHIND THE TWO MEN'S instinctive reactions lie differences in the natures and uses of their power bases.

Vance draws on the large bureaucracy of the State Department to

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