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LAST month, when President Carter's assertions about the Cubans' responsibility for the May invasion of Shaba Province, in Zaire, were being met with considerable skepticism, Henry Kissinger came to the President's defense. "All the evidence," he said, "is on [Carter's] side, yet here we are engaged in a public argument questioning the honor of the President of the United States." And that, he observed, "tells us something about the level of our public discourse." This was itself a curious contribution to the public discourse. For one thing, nothing had been said about Carter's integrity; it was not his rectitude but his information that some found questionable. For another, Kissinger, whose own veracity has recently been challenged in the Senate, spent six years in the service of a President of the United States whose honor often had to be questioned. And how could the former Secretary of State be so confident that "all the evidence"—or even a preponderance of it—supported Carter's claims? Even now, we have only the President's word for it. In a speech last month to the National Military Intelligence Association, Admiral Daniel Murphy, an intelligence officer at the Pentagon, said that the White House lacked "what the press could term hard, conclusive . . . evidence or proof of Cuban involvement." Some members of Congress have been summoned to the President's office and, on leaving it, have said that they were persuaded of the validity of the charges, but no one has explained what persuaded them. So much uncertainty surrounds recent events in Zaire and Angola that the Senate Intelligence Committee, which has completed a study of what happened there in 1975 and 1976, has considered holding another investigation of the whole murky affair.

What the committee might look into is not only the way the White House handled the matter but the kind of information on which it based its judgments. Where did it come from? How and by whom was it appraised? It is suspected that some of it dates back three years or so, when Cubans were training Zairian exiles—mostly from Shaba, which was Katanga when Zaire was the Congo—along with Angolans for the conflicts that followed the withdrawal of the Po

those who moved into Zaire two months ago. But the same Cuban-trained forces crossed the same border in 1977, and if there was Cuban participation this year there must have been Cuban participation last year. We condemned the 1977 invasion but never once raised the issue of Cuban responsibility. As for 1978, the only Americans known to have been near the scene were the crews that airlifted Moroccan reinforcements and supplies for the French and Belgian troops in the combat zone, and none of those Americans left the secured areas in which the planes landed. There must have been some Central Intelligence Agency people around—they, like the Cubans, had given military training to Angolans—but, according to John Stockwell, who was one of their number until 1976, and whose "In Search of Enemies" has just been published, many of them were agents of misinformation, sometimes of mischief, and the reports they sent home were often "patently false." It is unlikely that by early this year they were being taken seriously, even at C.I.A. headquarters. If any of our reconnaissance satellites were focussed on the area, they apparently got nothing to strengthen the Administration's case. As a rule, the justification for withholding intelligence from the public is that revealing it would jeopardize those who provided it. But this does not apply to machinery in space, and in the present case it seems unlikely to apply to information gained in other ways. The likeliest sources would be the Zairian government in Kinshasa; our own and other diplomats in that city, some eight hundred miles from Kolwezi, where most of the fighting took place; and the European and Moroccan troops and the prisoners they interrogated. Exposure could not harm such sources. At the same time, few of them could be regarded as disinterested. Most of them wanted American involvement in one form or another, and the best way to bring that

about was to persuade Washington that the conflict (which in some respects appeared to be a civil war, a war of secession, or a revolution) was at least in part ideological—a Cold War battle in which Angolans and Cubans were being used to further Soviet ambitions. If it was nothing but an attempt by some unhappy exiles to seize control of their homeland, there would be no support here for intervention in any form.

MAKING such distinctions raises again some old questions about American national interest. If it were established beyond doubt that the Cubans were involved—heavily involved—in Zaire in May, would this fact in itself require us to support their adversaries? When we decided to pursue the war in Southeast Asia no further, in effect we put the region beyond the sphere of national interest—beyond what used to be called our "defense perimeter." There were never any Cuban or Soviet troops in Vietnam, or any large outside forces except our own, but that war was ideological in character, and the Russians were supplying the North Vietnamese. Are we now being asked to redefine the national interest in such a way as to include Zaire and Angola while still excluding Southeast Asia? And if a few battalions of Cuban soldiers showed up in Vietnam to help in the border skirmishes with Cambodia, would that bring the region once more within our area of vital concern? Would we then have to consider helping the Cambodians? Do a few clear photographs of uniformed Cubans on a battlefield give us a stake in the outcome of any conflict? Given the realities of power in this century, it is plain that our foreign policy must in large part be determined by what the Soviets do. But must we be hostages to Cuban policy? These are questions that might and probably should be raised in the Senate, but they probably won't be.

It may turn out that the facts do support Carter and that there was indeed a substantial Cuban presence in Shaba. And it may be that other facts support Castro's disclaimers. Castro does not deny the presence of Cuban troops in Angola, but he has said that he did not authorize Cuban involvement in Zaire and that, furthermore, he counselled the Angolans against the invasion a month before it took place.

If he did oppose it and if Cubans were

