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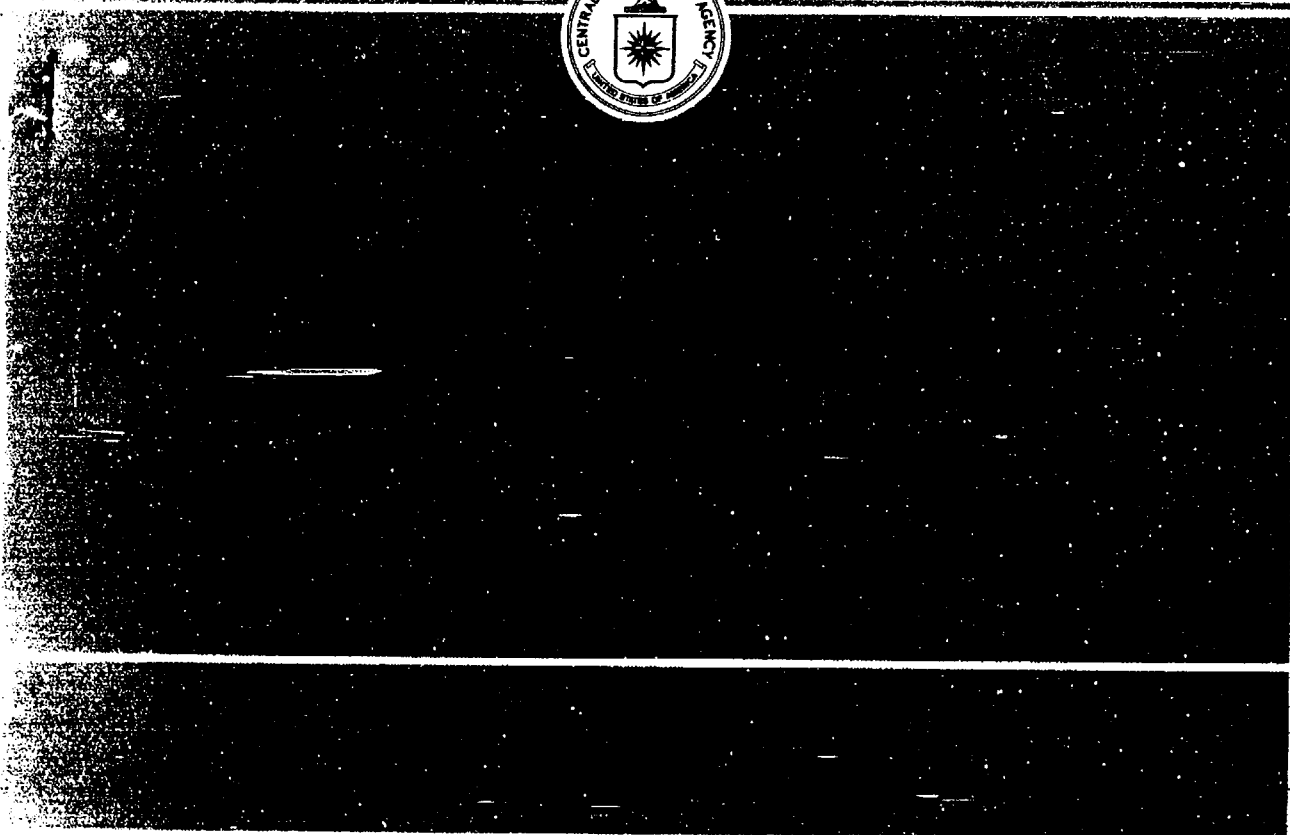
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December 1992

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BALKAN CRISIS: Milosevic Undermining Panic Challenge

Serbian President Milosevic is trying to ensure his position by barring federal Prime Minister Panic's electoral challenge, using the media to discredit him, and maneuvering to keep the federal Army in his camp.

[redacted] Milosevic almost certainly is behind the decision of the Serbian electoral commission to rule that Panic fails to meet residency requirements to run for the republic presidency. A campaign by Milosevic-controlled Belgrade TV to characterize the Prime Minister as a traitor to Serbia has coincided with a drop in Panic's standing from second to seventh place in a recent poll. [redacted] The Serbian government has also moved to exclude voters who did not participate in the last two rounds of balloting, one of which was boycotted by the democratic opposition. Some senior Army officers, meanwhile, have accused the Prime Minister of politicizing the office of federal defense minister, which he also holds; Panic yesterday offered to name a new defense minister before the 20 December election. [redacted]

Milosevic's efforts are meeting some resistance. Panic has vowed to fight the electoral board's decision; opposition leaders are protesting the tampering with voting lists and are threatening to boycott the election unless all Serbians can register and Panic is authorized to run. [redacted]

Comment: Milosevic and his entrenched Socialist Party machine will do whatever is necessary to prevent Panic from gaining power in Serbia. Verbal attacks by elements of the Army almost certainly are a warning to Panic, to federal President Cosic, to opposition leaders, to the public, and to military officers with undecided allegiance. Milosevic, nevertheless, may have miscalculated by trying to force Panic out of the race. Out of concern that such heavyhanded tactics could decrease his legitimacy among ordinary Serbians and increase support for the democratic opposition, he may reconsider. [redacted]

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