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# The Perils in Playing 'Nuclear Games'

Swept under the secrecy stamp is chilling evidence that during the past three decades U. S. military leaders have played dangerous games with nuclear power.

The evidence is buried so deeply in Pentagon vaults that we have been able to dig out only a few scraps. From top secret Rand and Institute for Defense Analyses studies, we have collected enough details, however, to report that the military brass sometimes have deliberately misled their civilian superiors by withholding or distorting information.

More often, the information has become distorted in the communications process. Sophisticated intelligence is oversimplified as it is boiled down for the easy reading of top policymakers. They confine themselves largely to reading intelligence digests, which reduce voluminous field reports down to a few brief paragraphs.

At a typical National Security Council meeting, for example, two dozen complex problems may be taken up. They are summarized in such simple terms, however, that the policymakers couldn't possibly have a full grasp of the questions they are expected to decide.

The simplification process produces what the experts privately call "blunders intelligence." This is stark intelligence, stripped of its subtleties. Its terse, compact form sometimes has a powerful impact that would be softened by more sophisticated information.

In the nuclear age, this can have catastrophic consequences. Intelligence sources tell us that the simplification process led to "terrible errors" for example, in assessing the Bay of Pigs expedition.

Far more frightening, of course, has been the oversimplification and mis-

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information that have brought the U.S. to the nuclear brink. Here are a few episodes from the secret studies:

• **Quemoy-Matsu Crisis**—In a recent column, we reported that the military brass snookered their White House superiors into believing it would take tactical nuclear weapons to repel an expected Chinese Communist invasion of Quemoy and Matsu islands in 1958.

The misinformed National Security Council, therefore, tentatively approved the use of nuclear weapons against the Chinese mainland. Fortunately, the crisis died down before the missiles were unleashed.

• **Laos Crisis**—Washington got its lines so tangled in Laos in the summer of 1960 that it would have made splendid comic opera if the consequences hadn't been so fraught with risk. Different U. S. agencies, believe it or not, wound up supporting opposites in a rebellion.

The State Department strongly backed the government of Premier Thao Samsonth. At the same time, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Department secretly encouraged a young paratroop captain, Kong Le, who then led a rebellion.

Both Kong Le and Thao Samsonth drew supplies, according to the secret evidence, from different U.S. sources. The confusion led to a crisis, which could have involved the U.S. in a Vietnam-style war. But the late John F. Kennedy came to power in 1961 and

refused to commit American forces to the remote and mountainous Laos.

• **Berlin Crisis**—President Kennedy was so confused by the intelligence out of Berlin in 1961 that he sent Lucius Clay on a special mission to Germany to find out what was going on.

The President, according to the secret evidence, never really found out. Friction developed between Clay, the Berlin field commanders and Joint Chiefs, who gave the President conflicting reports.

One problem was that Kennedy never saw the reports of the experts, who understood the pattern of Soviet interference. They could tell how serious the Soviets were by the way they buzzed allied planes and handed the checkpoints.

Hampered by misinformation, Kennedy sent 13 tanks through the checkpoints to uphold U.S. rights in Berlin. The incident could have precipitated a deadly confrontation with the Soviet Union.

• **Cuban Crisis**—In 1962, President Kennedy won a nuclear showdown with Nikita Khrushchev while the Pentagon lied about what was going on. Kennedy threw a blockade around Cuba and prepared to ship Soviet missile shipments from entering Cuban waters. A blockade, of course, is an act of war.

As a confrontation approached in the Atlantic between Soviet ships enroute to Cuba with missiles and American warships ordered to block their passage, the President had on his desk a

secret intelligence estimate warning that the risk of nuclear war was 50-50. When the Soviets backed off, Dean Rusk, then the Secretary of State, remarked grimly: "We've been eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked."

• **Vietnam Crisis**—The military brass, eager to test their tactics and weapons in the field, wanted to become more deeply involved in Vietnam. They pumped bad information into the Pentagon until President Kennedy characteristically sent Defense Secretary Robert McNamara to Vietnam in September 1963, to seek out the facts.

An AID official in the Mekong delta risked his career to go over the heads of his superiors and report the true situation to McNamara. But the Secretary was talked out of it by his military advisers and the U.S. began preparing to intervene.

On Aug. 2, 1964, North Vietnamese patrol boats, looking for ships that had raided the North Vietnamese coast, attacked American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. No one was hurt; no damage was done.

A second dark-of-night "attack" probably never even occurred but was the deviation of faulty radar. With these dubious ingredients, President Lyndon Johnson created a phony incident, which he used to inflame the nation.

The American people never learned the truth about the Gulf of Tonkin incident until it was too late. They had no real say about the 60,000 Americans who would die in Vietnam, nor the \$150 billion that the war would cost, nor the damage that would be done to national prestige, nor the deep divisions that would be created at home. In a future column, we will publish another report on the nuclear games that have been played in Washington.