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Those 'Sanitized' Notes on Cuba

While the audience in the main tent was being entertained last week by the Carter-Castro argument over whether Cuba had had a hand in the Zaire invasion, an amusing little media sideshow was going on down at the end of the hallway.

Call it the saga of the sanitized summary. It will tell you something about the way things work in this town.

After the May invasion of Zaire by Katangan rebels operating from Angola, the White House and the State Department couldn't seem to get together on how hard to press the charge that the Cubans and the Russians, particularly the Cubans, were behind it all. The White House took a hard line. The State Department didn't seem so sure.

That was the situation early last week when Jody Powell, the president's press secretary, took a hand. He read to several reporters a document prepared with the help of the CIA that summarized the administration's charges against Cuba.

It said that intelligence reports supported three main conclusions: 1) That the Cuban presence in Angola is pervasive and little is done without Cuban involvement. 2) That Katangan rebels have been armed and trained by Cubans and possibly several years ago. 3) That the May invasion of Shaba province was with Cuban cooperation, although there was no firm evidence that Cubans accompanied the invaders beyond Angola.

One result of Powell's briefings was a CBS television news report the next morning. Another was a page-1 story in that afternoon's Washington Star reporting that the administration, "citing reliable intelligence sources," maintained it could chart Cuban involvement with the Katangans up to the invasion jumping-off point.

While not mentioning a specific document, the Star story referred to "sanitized" intelligence details now coming to light. It said they gave "the most detailed glimpses yet" of what was behind the U.S. charges, but added that they did not contain evidence "because the administration is afraid of compromising its sources."

Not earthshaking, to be sure, but reporters for NBC and The Washington Post asked Powell for a crack at the same material and got it.

That night NBC News carried a report on a White House "summary of assertions" on Cuba's involvement. The next morning The Post's front page was dominated by two stories under a banner headline: "Carter: Declines Castro's Failure to Stop Attack." The story on the right side of the page dealt with the president's remarks about the news conference the previous day. The headline "U.S. Releases Summary of Its Evidence," dealt with the CIA memo.

White House yesterday made available a summary of evidence on which the president based his accusations. This treatment stretched the facts in a couple of ways. In no sense was the document "released." It was "made available" only in a limited sense. The reporters were allowed to see it but were not allowed to take copies with them. In fact, The Post went further than Powell wanted it to go when it disclosed that the story was based on an actual document.

Further, as the story itself made abundantly clear by billing the document as a "summary of evidence," The Post gave it far too much status. It was a summary of the administration's charges and notably short on evidence.

Whatever its flaws, the heavily played story got quick results. Reporters, members of Congress and others asked the White House for copies of the document. The Post said it had been released.

The initial White House reaction was to say that there wasn't any release. But the pressure grew, particularly from Capitol Hill and before the day was over, Powell decided to make the document, which he describes as "briefing notes," truly available.

In the meantime, a New York Times reporter turned up a copy on his own, which brings us to the final act.

The News Business

The next morning, June 16, The Times reported on page A10 that the administration "has added a new dimension" to its efforts to substantiate Carter's charges against Cuba.

Until the previous day, The Times said, the administration had refused to make public any documentation of the charges. "But yesterday, Jody Powell authorized disclosure [of the CIA memo] to reporters on a private basis." The Times went on to quote at length from the 800-word document. Like the earlier reports, it described it as "sanitized" and noted that it lacked details to support its assertions.

So finally the document was out. And since it was indeed "sanitized" to the point of sterility, it hasn't changed the situation one iota.

Why all the secrecy in the first place? The document was not classified, and it contained nothing remotely threatening to intelligence operatives. Why wasn't it released to the public at the start, instead of being farmed out to individual members of the press on a more or less confidential basis?

Powell's answer is that the document did not contain verifiable details and could not for intelligence reasons. Therefore, as an official White House release it would not have satisfied the press and would have served only to generate pressure for details that could not be given.

He's probably right about that. Nevertheless, those sanitized briefing notes of his got a lot of mileage in their brief run.