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A Foolish Cuban Crisis

The latest fuss with Russia over Cuba is a Carter-style crisis. Everybody looks silly.

Consider first the two previous administrations. According to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, the Russian combat unit, whose presence in Cuba has now been confirmed, was there for at least three or four years, and maybe more. That means the Ford administration did not learn of its existence despite scouring the island at the time when the dispatch of Cuban troops to Africa touched off the Angola crisis of 1976.

It implies that the Nixon administration failed to detect the troops back in 1970 when it intensified surveillance prior to negotiating with the Russians an agreement barring establishment of Soviet bases in Cuba. In each case the suggestion is that, for all their tough anti-communism, the Nixon and Ford administrations were less vigilant than the Carter administration. In other words, Nixon and Ford failed where Carter succeeded.

The Russians look even more foolish. It has repeatedly been made known to them that this country was sensitive on the subject of their military presence in Cuba. President Carter raised the issue with President Brezhnev at the Vienna summit in June.

Sen. Richard Stone (D-Fla.) mentioned the possibility of combat troops in Cuba on July 17 in hearings of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the new strategic arms limitation treaty, SALT II. Vance wrote Stone a letter regarding Russian combat troops in Cuba on July 27.

The July 27 letter indicated that while there was "no evidence" of combat troops in Cuba, "increased attention" would be paid to the problem. The context of the letter suggested that the treaty itself would be jeopardized if something untoward turned up.

But despite the high stakes and the constant warnings, the Russians behaved as though sublimely indifferent to what was happening. They did not offer the kind of explanation—just a training mission, for instance—that

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would have allayed suspicions. Neither did they take rudimentary security precautions. Indeed, the United States was able to confirm the existence of the combat unit in mid-August because the Russians went out on maneuvers so openly that they were photographed in action.

Finally, there is the strange behavior of the Carter administration. The administration dismissed the likelihood of a Soviet combat presence when Stone first raised the issue on July 17.

When confirmation did come, the administration let Sen. Frank Church, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, break the news while canvassing the state prior to campaigning for reelection in Idaho. It did nothing to stop the senator when he said he would insist that the Soviet combat troops be withdrawn if there was to be SALT ratification.

But when the State Department subsequently surfaced the issue, things came up all confused. There was no clarity as to exactly what new development had taken place, or when, or what satisfaction the administration sought. The only clear thing was an acknowledgment by the secretary of state that there was no specific prohibition on the record against Soviet combat troops in Cuba.

It was as though a law-enforcement officer had declared of a thief: "I caught him red-handed. But I don't know what he did, or when, or what rule was violated, or what the punishment should be."

In those obscure conditions, the Russians might well feel the United States was blowing the whistle for domestic political purposes, and to upstage the conference of nonaligned nations now under way in Havana. They might react testily to the administration and refuse to make new arrangements governing the combat troops. In which case the arms control treaty would probably not be ratified.

A happier outcome is that the Russians would find some face-saving device to change the status of the combat brigade. That would make SALT ratification possible. But it would do little to meet the true issue—which is

Russia's use of Cuba as a proxy for adventurous aggrandizement.

So, while the situation is grim, the mood in Washington is not. On the contrary, compared with the Cuban missile crisis, even the best likely outcome of the current troubles presents a case of history repeating itself as farce.

In these circumstances, the president's call for "firm diplomacy" does not ease his plight. It only announces that once more he is in trouble for trying to come down on both sides of an issue.

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