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Administration Deeply Disturbed Post 11/21/70

The Cuban Sub Base Affair

By Chalmers M. Roberts
Washington Post Staff Writer

Although it refuses to disclose details of the "understanding" with the Soviet Union over Cuba, the Nixon administration is deeply disturbed by Soviet activity at the Cuban port of Cienfuegos.

It is contended that the new "understanding" with

Moscow precludes the use of that port to support Soviet nuclear missile submarines. While no official will say directly that Moscow is violating the "understanding," officials do say the continued presence of Soviet vessels useful for submarine support is inconsistent with the "understanding."

It seems evident that Washington wants to warn Moscow but, thus far, also wants to avoid a direct public confrontation over the Cuban issue. Nevertheless, the issue has cast a deep pall over the whole range of Soviet-American relationships including such on-going negotiations as those on Berlin and on the limitation of strategic arms.

"If the Soviet Union wanted to establish a basis of confidence with the United States, this is not the

way to do it," was the comment of one key official.

What follows is a run-through of the history and current status of the Cuban base affair, so far as it has been made public by the United States and the Soviet Union and from what officials are willing to say privately but not on the public record.

The administration has tried, and continues to try, to keep secret the details of the Soviet-American discussions leading to the "understanding." But press probing forced onto the public record Tuesday's formal acknowledgement that secret meetings had led to the "understanding" although there is "no document of record in writing."

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BASE, From A1

This capital is full of skeptics, including men in high administration offices, who view the whole Soviet submarine base issue as essentially an exercise in domestic politics and/or in executive branch lobbying for more congressional funding for the Pentagon.

It is a fact that more than a month before the recent election some officials who knew what was going on said that President Nixon was afraid he might be faced with "a Democratic Keating." That was a reference to former Sen. Kenneth Keating of New York, a Republican who unsettled the Democratic Kennedy administration in 1962 also a congressional election year, with accounts of Soviet missiles moving into Cuba. President Kennedy later revealed such movements at the beginning of the Cuban

missile crisis that October.

Others, who do not ascribe dark political motives to the administration, believe there is no "understanding" beyond what Moscow has publicly said and they expect the Soviet Union to keep port facilities at Cienfuegos for its submarines.

There also are those in Washington today who contend that the "understanding" now announced amounts to giving Moscow something for nothing. The argument is that the United States has publicly assured the Soviet Union that it has no intention to "invade or intervene" in Cuba in exchange for an unwritten Soviet promise to live up to a part of the 1962 missile crisis outcome.

Whatever political content was involved in Mr. Nixon's thinking, the elections are now past. But there is deep resentment in high administration circles over the substantive charge of giving something for nothing.

The administration's argument, it can be said authoritatively, is that there are

only two ways to view the outcome of the 1962 crisis that led the world to the brink of nuclear war:

Either the then Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev, agreed not to install offensive weapons in Cuba in exchange for an American pledge not to invade Cuba or he withdrew the missiles without any agreement—in which case Moscow was free to reintroduce such weapons and Washington was free to invade Cuba.

Hence, it is argued, since an American invasion is not in the cards, what is wrong with giving a non-invasion pledge now in exchange for Soviet agreement not to emplace offensive nuclear weapons in Cuba?

The details of just when and how the "understanding" was reached remain secret. But the available evidence indicates that it was reached—chiefly through talks between Henry A. Kissinger, the President's foreign policy adviser, and Anatoly F. Dobrynin, Moscow's long-time ambassador in Washington. The evidence also indicates the "understanding" was reached around Oct. 10, a few days after Mr. Nixon returned from his European trip.

On Oct. 10, a Soviet submarine tender and a tug, which had first raised the Cuban base issue when they put in with two barges at Cienfuegos on Sept. 9, pulled out of the port at the south of Cuba. When the

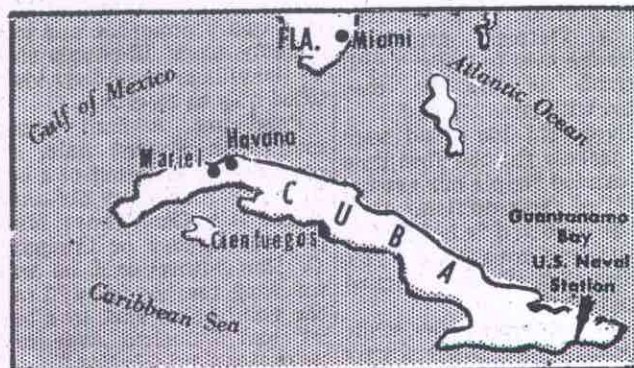


United Press International

During Oct. 22 meeting, President Nixon escorts Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko after 15-minute private chat.

two vessels put in at Mariel, near Havana on the north shore, administration officials dismissed this as meaningless, predicting that the ships soon would leave for home. They clearly felt that Moscow intended to live up to the "understanding."

The story of the talks first broke in the Chicago Tribune on Oct. 17 and in The Washington Post Oct. 18. The Tribune account said that "the United States



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forced Russia through secret talks to dismantle a Soviet submarine base being built in Cuba." Coming during the election campaign, the tone of the story helped create suspicions that the move was politically motivated. This was furthered by the remark on Nov. 2 of Herbert Klein, the White House communications director, that submarine base construction had been halted after the administration applied "strong but quiet diplomacy."

Klein's remarks stirred an internal storm and his right to speak on foreign affairs thereupon was severely curtailed by presidential order.

By the time of Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko's call on President Nixon at the White House on Oct. 22, Washington thought it had a firm and viable agreement. Given the delicate state of Soviet-American relations, in the wake of what was considered Soviet collusion in violations of the Mideast standstill and in view of the SALT and Berlin negotiations, the administration's hope was to be able to say nothing about the Cuban affair.

After Gromyko left the White House officials said they felt the Cuban issue had been dissolved because the vessels had left Cienfuegos and because Moscow had acknowledged a 1962 "understanding" and it now

had been extended to cover potential submarine bases in Cuba.

But over the weekend of Oct. 31-Nov. 1 the submarine tender and tug arrived again at Cienfuegos. Even then officials privy to the "understanding" said they were not alarmed, guessing the ships would stay a few days and then leave. The arrival of the ships was made public on Nov. 9, six days after the elections.

A that point officials said that if the ships did not soon leave "we'll have another situation." The ships are still there and the new situation is what so disturbs the administration.

It was theorized here that, in returning the ships to Cienfuegos, the Soviet Union, perhaps was making the point that it had a right under the "understanding" to have its ships call at friendly ports.

In an official statement by the Soviet press agency Tass on Oct. 13, which the United States quickly and by predesign termed "positive," the Soviet Union had coupled a statement that it "has not built and is not building its military base on Cuba" with a declaration of its "inalienable right" to have its ships call at friendly foreign ports, including Fidel Castro's Cuba.

But this week, U.S. offi-

cialists said that the presence at Cienfuegos of the tender, tug and barges (the barges had never left) could not come under that classification. It can be presumed that representations on this point have been made to the Soviet Union.

On Tuesday the State Department spokesman, when asked if the presence of the ships at Cienfuegos constituted a violation of the "understanding," replied that his "judgment would be that it does not, but it requires careful and close scrutiny, which it is getting."

In essence, the administration does feel that a violation is involved, or certainly will be if the vessels do not quickly leave, but it has avoided creating a public confrontation with Moscow on the issue.

On Wednesday, there was a call in Congress for just such a confrontation. Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Tex.) said in a floor speech, "It is time that we confront Russia and determine what is going on in Cuba." Rep. Paul G. Rogers (D-Fla.) called on

President Nixon "to make public any and all agreements which concern Cuba," adding that "Congress and the people of the United States have a right to know" what they are.

The Tass statement of Oct. 13 said Moscow "is not doing anything that would contradict the understanding reached" with Washington in 1962. Moscow, it added, "has always strictly adhered to this understanding, will adhere to it in the future, too, and proceeds from the assumption that the American side will also strictly fulfill this understanding."

But was there an "understanding" at the end of the 1962 crisis?

On Oct. 13 when State Department spokesman Robert J. McCloskey characterized the Tass statement as "positive" he also was prepared, if asked, to say that there was no understanding in 1962. The reason: Castro failed to permit United Nations inspection of the Soviet missile withdrawal, a part of the public Kennedy offer of an agreement to Khrushchev. But nobody

asked McCloskey that question.

According to Elie Abel's 1966 book on the missile crisis, Robert Kennedy assured Dobrynin on Nov. 20, 1962 that if the Soviet bombers started moving out the President would issue his no-invasion pledge within 30 days. The bombers did leave the last one on Dec. 6.

On that same Nov. 20, however, President Kennedy at a press conference said "important parts of the understanding" with Khrushchev "remain to be carried out" and he mentioned Castro's refusal to permit U.N. inspection. He never issued a public no-invasion pledge. Castro in 1966 asserted that the United States had made several secret concessions to solve the crisis but he would give no details. The State Department denied his claim.

On Sept. 25 of this year about 10 days or two weeks after Washington concluded a submarine base was being put together in Cienfuegos, a White House official, not identifiable, said that the Soviet Union "can be under no doubt that we would view the establishment of a strategic base in the Caribbean with the utmost seriousness."

He cited the Kennedy words from that Nov. 20, 1962, press conference that "if all offensive weapons systems are removed from Cuba and kept out of the hemisphere in the future, under adequate verification and safeguards, and if Cuba is not used for the export of aggressive communist purposes, there will be peace in the Caribbean." The official cited no "understanding" from 1962.

On Nov. 13, in making the first partial disclosure of the new "understanding" McCloskey did not claim one from 1962. He put it this way: "In view of President Kennedy's press conference statements on Nov. 22, 1962, and to which this administration has referred, and the Soviet government's statement issued by Tass Oct. 13 this year, we are confident that there is understanding by the two governments of the respective positions on the limits of their actions with regard to Cuba."

Five days later, this was

expanded by McCloskey into an unwritten "understanding," reached this fall by private talks. In short, the administration now was conceding that it had done what President Kennedy had not done, at least on the public record, despite the Soviet contentions: given a pledge not to invade Cuba.

The administration contends that in return it now has an "understanding" which precludes what it had feared was afoot in Cienfuegos, the creation of a base or facility, whether it be a

"Soviet" or a "Cuban" facility, that could be used to service Soviet submarines carrying offensive nuclear weapons.

It is added that the United States, as McCloskey said, has no intention to "invade or intervene" in Cuba. Ergo, it was a worthwhile deal for the U.S., it is contended.

But what now troubles the administration is the fact

that, in its view, Moscow is not living up to its part of the new "understanding" for reasons that are unclear. Construction continues at Cienfuegos, including a road around the harbor, and barracks are ready to receive sailors on port leave. As of yesterday, officials said, the tender, tug and two barges were still at Cienfuegos, ready to service Soviet missile submarines.