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Matter of Fact

By Joseph Alsop

Handover of the SAMs

UNLESS a great many important signs are totally misleading, Nikita S. Khrushchev will hand over his surface-to-air missiles in Cuba to Fidel Castro on or about May 1.

The principal signs are simple enough. On the one hand, the Soviets established a most elaborate training program over a year ago. Thus they have now prepared Cubans to take over all levels of management of the highly complex air defense system that was put into Cuba just before the abortive attempt to deploy Soviet ballistic missiles on the island.

On the other hand, the Soviets have more recently been making fairly obvious preparations for the withdrawal of their own personnel. The most advanced and secret equipment of the radar warning net has been replaced already with equipment of an earlier type, no doubt for reasons of security.

Transport vessels are also being provided, to bring home the Soviet officers and men who now staff the entire SAM air defense system. When this final withdrawal is completed during April, the Soviet mission in Cuba will almost certainly total less than 2000 men—probably around 1500 in all, or approximately the number required to staff this country's London Embassy and its annexes.

FOR ALL practical purposes, this is the end of the story of the Soviet military presence in Cuba. At the peak, during the desperate missile crisis in October, 1962, the Kremlin had in Cuba something like 15,000

men in uniform, or men at any rate who would have worn uniforms if they had been on duty at home in Russia.

By May 1, no Soviet soldiers will be left there, except for a small military mission or advisory group. The majority of the Soviet element in Cuba will then be Embassy personnel, agronomists and other technicians aiding Cuban agriculture and industry, and members of the Kremlin trade mission.

This ending of the story of the Soviet military presence in Cuba is almost over-rich in irony, it must also be added. That presence never constituted the smallest offensive threat to this country, except for the brief and breathless period in October, 1962, before President Kennedy coolly called Khrushchev's bluff, and the half-installed ballistic missiles were hastily removed.

YET EVEN after the ballistic missiles were shipped back to Russia, and even after the Soviet force in Cuba began to be conspicuously reduced, the mere fact of this Soviet military presence only 90 miles from our shores outraged and alarmed vast numbers of Americans. But what is the American reaction now that the last Soviet soldiers in Cuba on operational assignments are soon to go home?

A surge of scarcely concealed anxiety is the reaction, at any rate among the more thoughtful officials in Washington. The truth is that although it was unpleasant to think of Soviet soldiers deployed in Cuba, it is even less pleasant to think of Castro's Cubans doing the same jobs.

The whole island is dotted with SAM-2—the Soviet surface-to-air missiles that are capable of shooting down American U-2s. U.S.

air reconnaissance of Cuba by regular U-2 flights meanwhile continues, and President Johnson will certainly not wish to stop this air reconnaissance just before the SAMs have been handed over to Castro.

Thus two questions are agitating the American policy-makers. The first is whether the handover will be complete, or will merely be apparent. It is entirely possible for the Kremlin to give operational control of the entire defense system to the Cubans, while retaining an electronic key that would prevent any SAMs being fired at U-2s without Soviet consent.

BUT HAS this electronic key been retained by the Soviets, with all its inherent risk of affronting the touchy and emotional Cuban dictator? No one knows the real answer to the question of the key, but the current betting is that there will be no Soviet key, and that Castro will therefore get full control of the SAMs.

That leads to the second question, whether Castro will tolerate the continuing U-2 reconnaissance, or will order his SAMs into action after he gains control of them. There is no doubt that the Kremlin wants Castro to go on looking the other way when the U-2s come over Cuba, but will he actually do so?

Most policy-makers are convinced that Castro will be prudent. In that case there is no likelihood that the effective liquidation of the Soviet military presence in Cuba will be the immediate prelude to still another breathless Cuban crisis. But there is some nagging anxiety all the same, and herein lies the central irony.

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