

# Telegraphing Khrushchev



WASHINGTON: Very recently, President Johnson was warned at a White House meeting with his foreign-policy and intelligence advisers that the Soviet Union and Communist Cuba may be getting ready to spring a trap on the United States.

Two items of "hard" intelligence, plus the simple logic of the situation, lead to this suspicion. The trap, it is thought, was probably agreed upon during the recent conversations in Moscow between Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro. Castro's cutoff of water to the Guantanamo base, which was undoubtedly preconcerted with Khrushchev, may well have been a first testing maneuver.

One item of intelligence seems at first glance good news—that the Soviets are steadily reducing the number of their troops in Cuba. The other item of intelligence is that the Russians are now training Castro's Cubans in the use of the SAMs.

The SAMs are the non-nuclear surface-to-air missiles which Khrushchev installed in Cuba in large numbers in 1962 before the great October crisis. U.S. intelligence picked up the existence of the anti-aircraft missile sites—known as SAMSITES in intelligence shorthand—in late August, 1962. The reasoning which has led some of the President's advisers strongly to suspect the presence of a trap is similar to the reasoning which then led CIA Director John McCone to conclude that Khrushchev intended to place nuclear-capable missiles in Cuba. McCone was at the time almost alone in this view. His reasoning was simple.

The SAMs, McCone reasoned, had only one conceivable purpose—to shoot down the high-flying U-2 reconnaissance planes which could not be reached by ordinary anti-aircraft. Therefore the purpose of the SAMSITES must be to blind the eyes of the American intelligence. This purpose only made sense if the Soviets intended to place in Cuba some things they did not want the American intelligence to see. Those things could only be the nuclear-tipped missiles which could be directed at the American mainland.

McCone's reasoning, of course, turned out to be right, and the October crisis, with its clear threat of thermonuclear war, ensued. But during and for a long time after that crisis, the SAMSITES were manned exclusively by Russians. At the height of the crisis, a single U-2 was shot down by a SAM. How this happened has never been satisfactorily explained—there is a theory that the Russian SAMSITE commander acted against orders, and another theory that he was forced to shoot by Cubans who overpowered the base.

In any case, the SAMs have never since been used against the U-2s. As part of the Kennedy-Khrushchev deal, the U-2s continued to overfly Cuba unmolested. These overflights provide the essential assurance that there has been no further attempt to place in Cuba missiles capable of destroying the United States.

Castro, of course, never liked the Kennedy-Khrushchev deal. After the crisis, during the period of very chilly relations between Castro and Khrushchev, one of Castro's chief complaints was

that, although the SAMSITES were on Cuban soil, no Cuban was permitted to set foot on them. Castro has also repeatedly denounced the U-2 overflights as "acts of piracy," and demanded that they cease.

In the light of these facts, the hard intelligence that the Russians are now training the Cubans in the use of the SAMs takes on a sinister meaning. So does the fact that the Soviets are steadily reducing the number of their troops in Cuba.

For the intelligence analysts apply to these facts the same kind of simple but compelling logic that led McCone to his conclusion about the meaning of the SAMSITES in 1962. One day soon Khrushchev may announce—truthfully—that the last Soviet soldier has left Cuban soil. In that case, Khrushchev can claim with some show of reason that he is not responsible for what Fidel Castro, chief of the sovereign state of Cuba, may do.

What Castro may do, once his own men have their fingers on the triggers of the SAMs, is perfectly obvious. He may demand that the "acts of piracy" cease forthwith, and threaten to shoot down any American planes which come within range of his missiles. Indeed, it seems sensible to predict that, if Khrushchev gives him the green light, this is precisely what Castro will do.

Thus the nature of the trap which the President's advisers suspect was laid at the Moscow meeting becomes clear. For in the United Nations, the neutralists and the Afro-Asians would doubtless enthusiastically support Castro's demand that the "acts of piracy" cease. The demand would be supported in press and even government circles in Britain and France as well. And even in this country, voices would be raised to suggest that our "international image" should not be damaged for mere reasons of national security.

And yet there would be two predictable results if we were to bow to Castro's blackmail and cease to send reconnaissance planes within range of the Cuban SAMSITES. First, the eyes of the American intelligence would be dimmed if not blinded. The reconnaissance satellites alone could not provide real assurance against another Soviet attempt to upset the world power balance by placing nuclear-capable missiles 90 miles from our shores. If the Soviets tried the trick a second time, they would certainly be a lot more careful about camouflage than they were the first time.

As a second result, the United States would be made to look like an elephant running in terror from the Cuban mouse. And so, if Khrushchev and Castro spring their trap, what will President Johnson do?

"I'll tell you what the President will do," says one who ought to know. "He'll tell Castro that if he shoots down one American plane we'll destroy every SAMSITE on the island in the next two hours, and if the Afro-Asians don't like it, they can go jump in the lake. The real danger is that Khrushchev might feel so committed to Castro that he'd have to react violently in some way. That's why it has been suggested to the President that he ought to telegraph his intentions to Khrushchev, for if Khrushchev is convinced that the President really means it—which he does—he won't let Castro spring the trap."



Fidel Castro: Will he spring a trap?

Stewart Alsop