

Tiger file

Once More Unto the Brink: Cuban Crisis Relived

By ERIC SCHMITT
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 19 — Thirty years after the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, American intelligence analysts from that era gathered today to debate details of the drama that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.

In connection with the Central Intelligence Agency's first symposium on the missile crisis, the agency also made public 112 newly declassified documents about events leading up to the crisis and the Kennedy Administration's response.

Much of the information and details

discussed by panelists and an audience of about 400 former intelligence analysts, historians and journalists has already been published. But the new documents, combined with commentary and anecdotes from generals in command of U-2 spy plane surveillance, photography interpreters and senior intelligence advisers to President John F. Kennedy, recreated at least for a day the fear, uncertainty and, finally, supreme relief that gripped a nation locked in the defining cold war moment.

Today's symposium and documents also supplied details about how international and domestic political sensi-

tivities contributed to the failure of senior Kennedy Administration officials to take seriously warning signals coming from Cuba in early 1962.

While high-altitude reconnaissance photography — a technological breakthrough in the early 1960's — gave the United States an advantage, flaws and miscalculations nearly caused a catastrophe.

For example, the documents show that John A. McCone, the Director of Central Intelligence, warned Kennedy Cabinet members, including Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, during an Aug. 21 meeting that unusual Soviet

NATIONAL TUESDAY, OCTOBER 20, 1992

A13

construction detected in Cuba could be for missile sites. But on Sept. 19, still almost a month before American analysts actually spotted Soviet-built medium-range ballistic missile sites in western Cuba, a United States intelligence report concluded that it was "incompatible with Soviet practice" to deploy such missiles outside the Soviet Union.

No Soviet officials who figured in the missile crisis took part in today's panel discussions. But Sergei Khrushchev, the former Soviet leader's son, was present as a special guest of the forum and advised that one lesson learned from the crisis was "to understand both sides of thinking."

Today's prevailing theme was of opportunities lost. Sidney N. Graybeal, the agency's former chief of offensive missiles analysis, said that the United

States had received 2,000 to 3,000 reports from various sources of Soviet missiles before the crisis, but that because many of these reports had been shown to be bogus, analysts had begun regarding them as the boy who cried wolf.

Others, like Warren E. Frank, retired chief of the agency's foreign intelligence branch, said the first-hand reports from 25 agents in Cuba were virtually ignored by headquarters in Washington until they began reporting 80-foot-long objects on flatbed trucks that could not negotiate the turns on Cuban streets without removing mailboxes and lampposts.

Dino A. Brugioni, chief of the National Photographic Interpretation Center's information branch, said that the United States normally had two U-2 flights a month over Cuba, but that

rather than increasing the surveillance in September 1962, when the Soviet missiles were delivered to Cuba, they were curtailed. Mr. Brugioni said the State Department asked for the curtailment, fearing another diplomatic incident like that which followed the downing of a U-2 over the Soviet Union in 1960. Another U-2 had been chased by Russian fighter jets over Sakhalin Island on Sept. 7, 1962, and three days later yet another was shot down over China.

The C.I.A. had touted the symposium as an important example of its new openness campaign. But many of the nearly 400 pages of documents released today had parts blacked out. A few questions from today's audience about electronic eavesdropping during the crisis — an off-limits topic today — were met with awkward silence.