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History Repeated as Farce

President Jimmy Carter reached a new low in his TV performance as star of a little farce entitled "Shoot-Out With the Red Brigade in Cuba," story and music by the boys from All Thumbs Corral at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. It was a melancholy moment for the nation as our commander-in-chief humorlessly explained that the Soviet brigade was not there and yet appeared to our satellite camera stare, was not there again today because Leonid Brezhnev assured him it would not go away. On the basis of this impeccable logic, the president proceeded to wish the brigade away as an international issue, and he preached a lesson on the urgency of an arms limitation treaty involving cooperative measures with the Soviet Union.

For me, this moment seemed especially sad and humiliating. In 1962, as deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, I made the alerting call to McGeorge Bundy and early in the morning of Oct. 16 took to the White House the photographs of Soviet missiles in Cuba that began the drama of the "13 days" of that year. I was in the White House when President Kennedy made his electrifying TV address to the nation—Oct. 22, 1962. Kennedy had a

real crisis, he sorted out his intelligence and his strategic priorities, and he courageously took the steps that forced the removal of Soviet strategic offensive weapons from the Caribbean. He did not consider the Soviet troops in Cuba an offensive force and did not ask for their withdrawal. This presidential action added immeasurably to American

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security and international prestige. How discouraging to see history repeated as farce.

The facts are that Soviet troops organized in combat units were in Cuba in strength in 1962 and that a number of those combat troops have been in Cuba ever since. After many annual troop rotations and a buildup of various kinds of Soviet military technicians in Cuba, the exact status of the Soviet forces became fuzzy. When Carter early in 1977 deliberately cancelled the traditional aircraft reconnaissance overflights of Cuba as a gesture of good will to Fidel Castro, the CIA and the De-

fense Intelligence Agency went virtually blind in this region. Intelligence analysts with many other things to do got the signal that the White House attached no priority to fine points about Soviet forces in Cuba. Consequently, they did not keep up to date on reading the messages later discovered to have referred to the brigade. Nor, evidently, did they trouble to sift out the exact meaning of the flurry of Soviet activity that plainly accompanied Castro's shipment of Cuban proxy armies all over Africa and as far away as Yemen on the oil-rich Arabian peninsula.

Actually, a few thousand Soviet combat troops in Cuba are the least menacing of the many activities Moscow has been conducting in our Caribbean backyard. After the first Soviet venture into Angola in 1975, the Soviet military presence in Cuba and in the Caribbean expanded substantially in ways genuinely threatening to American security interests. Within four years the U.S.S.R. was flying long-range airborne reconnaissance missions to cover the Atlantic reaches, was deploying submarines in Caribbean waters and operating them from a base at Cienfuegos, and was manning large communications facilities both for military command and elec-

tronic intercepts of U.S. signals. Soviet air power now includes a fighter-bomber force with advanced-design MiG23s as well as transport planes to ferry Cuban troops wherever they are wanted.

Thus the non-crisis began when the Carter administration discovered what had been in Cuba all along. The president and his spokesmen panicked and misled the Congress and the public with assurances of no change in the status of Soviet forces in Cuba, then belatedly discovered that the troops had indeed been brigaded and were photographed in August 1979 on maneuvers with tanks and artillery. This fact, they thought, was a "smoking gun" of evidence, so they handed it to their dovish, pro-Castro friend on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Frank Church. With one quick look at his problems in getting reelected in 1980 in conservative Idaho, Church took the gun and shot Carter in the foot by demanding removal of the Soviet brigade. It was this self-inflicted wound that the president thought he could heal by a judicious application of prime-time TV.

Actually, of course, the Carter-Church crowd got it backward. They seemed to believe that a few thousand combat troops were a danger if they maneu-

vered in Cuba but were acceptable if they were, as Brezhnev claimed, a "training center." It is exactly the fact that the Soviet Union is using Cuba as one vast training center for proxy armies and covert intervention forces that is causing a real strategic crisis in the Caribbean, in Africa, in the Mideast. This global assault on American interests and American friends abroad, passively acquiesced in by the United States, is what is destabilizing international peace and discrediting American foreign policy.

If President Carter had moved to meet this menace, he would at long last be facing strategic reality in a way that would hearten the American people and our allies. Instead, he gave us the baffling description of the little Red Brigade that is or is not there. This episode in presidential history is not crisis management; it is crisis mangling. It is small wonder our alliance partners watch in disbelief and dismay. How many real confrontation crises will the backroom strategic planners in Moscow calculate can safely be staged in the next 14 months? And will President Carter's men march up the hill and march down again, as they did in this case, without so much as a hint of concession from the Soviet Union?