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Non-Crisis, Non-Scoop

We seem to have weathered the crisis for mini-crisis or non-crisis of the Soviet combat brigade or training unit or something-in-between in Cuba.

Undaunted by the presence of several thousand Russian soldiers who might or might not fight if provoked, we have sent ships to the Caribbean.

The News Business

bolstered our intelligence operations around the world, activated a base in Florida and ordered the Marines to practice assaults on Guantánamo.

All of this—the suddenly surfaced Russian threat, the month-long thrashing around, the president's solution—was reported in the press at length and with the usual flourishes. True crisis or not, the Soviet brigade got the full treatment, including a Time cover story headlined "Storm Over Cuba."

There were no journalistic triumphs that I noticed. No enterprising reporter

got behind the lines to count the Russian men and tanks and guns. Nor did the press provide a clear account of how the whole episode came about at a moment so critical to the fate of SALT II.

No triumphs, but there was one classic example of a journalistic phenomenon—the exclusive non-scoop—that should not pass unnoticed.

The exclusive non-scoop is a piece of written journalism or television tape that has just one thing going for it: nobody else has it.

It isn't new or significant. It adds nothing to the situation. But it is yours and yours alone, so you play the hell out of it. All the rules of what is news by which we live, or pretend to, go out the window. It is a staple of print journalism, and it has been enthusiastically adopted by those newcomers on television.

This particular exclusive non-scoop was perpetrated by television's best and most-watched prime-time news magazine show, "60 Minutes." It was

"Castro is a casting editor's dream of how an aging revolutionary should look and act."

broadcast last Sunday, the evening before the president's televised speech.

The previous Friday, Fidel Castro, who had apparently decided that since his turf was involved he should have a piece of the action, invited eight American reporters to Havana for a press conference.

He told them that the Soviet "training base" in Cuba had not changed in size or function since 1962 and that this was known to every American president from Kennedy to Carter. He called Carter dishonest, insincere and immoral and charged him with using the Soviet troops issue in an attempt to solve his own political problems.

All this was reported in the print press and on television. Castro was allowed to have his say.

Then, on Sunday afternoon, Dan

Rather of "60 Minutes" had a personal session with Castro. They went over the same ground, and Castro said the same things he had said on Friday. But the interview was exclusive, so it—or a huge chunk of it—was rushed to the air as the lead "60 Minutes" segment that very evening. There wasn't even time to edit it before the broadcast.

So Castro got another time around. He was given 20 minutes of the time "60 Minutes" sells to its commercial customers for a reported \$145,000 per half-minute to tell his story to the 30 million or 40 million people who watch this deservedly popular program.

It wasn't bad television. Castro is a casting editor's dream of how an aging revolutionary should look and act. And Rather is the quintessential television

reporter—good-looking, intense, respectful but uncwable.

Castro did get off one good line. When Rather asked him about reports that the United States might beef up its military presence in Key West, he warned: "The tourists will not like that." And he offered some specifics about the Russian strength in Cuba during the 1962 missile crisis that may or may not have been new. But the bulk of the interview was what he had told the eight reporters just two days previously in virtually the same words.

Well, no harm was done. "60 Minutes" showed that it was ready to go anywhere for a story, even 90 miles offshore. In a way, it was a reverse application of the equal-time rule: Castro got his 20 minutes from "60 Minutes" and the next night the president got his on all networks.

As a matter of fact, it is probably appropriate that a non-scoop was the principal journalistic fruit of what by any reasonable definition was a non-crisis.