

Editor's Report

The Secret Cuban Crisis

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NEW YORK — All week long, at the United Nations, the international news spotlight has been focused on an act of Soviet chicanery so monumental and so brazen that our government couldn't at first believe photographic proof that it was happening.



W. R. Hearst, Jr.

That still continuing act, which also continues to block resumption of the Arab-Israeli peace talks, is the Russian-aided installation of anti-aircraft missile batteries inside the Suez Canal standstill zone — installations which got under way illegally on the very first day of the cease-fire agreement last Aug. 7.

It literally took weeks before President Nixon and Secretary of State Rogers would publicly admit the fact that Russia had pulled the wool over their eyes while verbally backing the United States truce plan. As a result, according to Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban, the standstill zone is now bristling with between 500 and 600 new SAM 2 and the far more threatening SAM 3 missiles.

Under these circumstances and in this light it strikes

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me that now is a very good time to examine another recent similar case which our State Department seems anxious to sweep under a diplomatic rug.

It concerns the mysterious business of what happened at Cienfuegos harbor, on the south shore of Cuba, where Soviet Russia for months was reported to be building—or preparing to build—a naval base to service its nuclear-armed submarines.

The average reader, I am quite sure, is poorly informed on this hush-hush affair which smells suspiciously like a fairly close replay of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. What little that has been printed has seeped or leaped out in strange dribs and drabs.

Since I also am quite certain that Americans SHOULD be informed as much as possible about the matter, I am going to patch together the available information here.

It is just possible, after all, that the Russians have again succeeded in pulling the wool over the eyes of our trusting top officials.

REPORTS OF UNUSUAL Russian activity at Cienfuegos harbor began buzzing about Washington as early as last spring. The unconfirmed first reports said variously that construction of facilities suitable for servicing submarines was in a preliminary stage and that surveyors were mapping out an eight-lane highway to Havana which could only be practical for heavy military use.

The first official word on the reports came with the release of heavily censored testimony given during hearings between July 8 and Aug. 3 of the House Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs by Adm. E. P. Holmes, commander-in-chief of the Atlantic Fleet, and by G. Warren Nutter, assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs.

The officials said, in effect, that they could neither confirm nor deny the reports despite overflights by our U 2 surveillance planes. Mr. Nutter, however, remarked at one point that possible construction of such a Soviet sub base "cannot be discounted."

Next came a sudden and quite unexplained explosion from the White House. On Sept. 25, presidential Press Secretary Ron Ziegler startled the press corps by warning

that the U.S. would view a Russian sub base in Cuba "with the utmost seriousness." Three days later Rep. L. Mendel Rivers, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, rose during a defense budget debate to declare — without explaining how he knew — that there was "no doubt" the Russians were building a Cuban naval base for submarines capable of launching nuclear missiles.

Calling this a clear violation of the 1962 U.S.-Soviet agreement against reintroduction of offensive missiles in Cuba, Rep. Rivers added:

"This is a crisis of the same gravity as 1962. The United States must take every diplomatic and, if necessary, military step to eliminate this base.

"We cannot live with this new Soviet threat on our very doorstep."

Two days after this blast, on Sept. 30, the Soviet Communist Party newspaper Pravda denied that the reported sub base had any foundation in fact and accused "certain circles" in Washington of trying to "fan up war psychos."

From here on in the picture gets really cloudy as our Secretary of State confers privately in New York with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko on Friday, Oct. 16.

Their conversation reportedly was on the Mideast crisis. But on the next Monday the New York Times came up with a story — buried on Page 9 — which reported that the U.S. and the Soviet Union "are understood to have reached a secret understanding that the Russians would remove from Cienfuegos, Cuba, equipment for a base to serve missile-carrying submarines."

The story went on to say that the departure of two Soviet ships — a tug and a submarine tender — from Cienfuegos on Oct. 10 was a signal that the Russians had started to carry out the agreement. But it added that two barges for servicing nuclear-armed subs remained.

Later on the same Monday, Oct. 19, that the obviously "leaked" Times story appeared, Rogers and Gromyko met again in New York. After this meeting a spokesman declared, with no elaboration, that Rogers had accepted reassurances from Gromyko that Russia was not violating the 1962 Cuban missile understanding.

"They apparently laid to rest the incipient crisis over Soviet naval construction at Cienfuegos harbor in Cuba," is how a story from United Press International summed it all up.

And that's all there is on the record — except that Gromyko was received at the White House three days later by a beaming President Nixon and the President's spokesman later specifically denied that the sub base affair had been discussed.

All attempts to get further comment from either the White House or the State Department on what happened in the sub base showdown have been unavailing.

I DON'T KNOW HOW all this murky mystery strikes you, but it strikes me as mighty strange indeed.

AND IT STRIKES ME FORCIBLY THAT THE AMERICAN PEOPLE ARE ENTITLED TO KNOW WHAT REALLY HAPPENED, IN FULL DETAIL.

It certainly is an undeniable fact that quiet, behind-the-scenes diplomacy can sometimes be the best way for a country to avoid a head-on collision with an enemy who is testing to see how much it can get away with.

Such may have been the case here, and if so our State Department deserves a lot of credit.

It also may be that the President and Bill Rogers, in their anxiety for more Russian cooperation with American peace efforts, may once again have had the wool pulled over their eyes.

Gromyko is the same Kremlin agent who sat in the White House in 1962, stared President Kennedy in the eye, and swore that Russia was not shipping nuclear missiles into Cuba at a time when Kennedy had photographic proof to the contrary in his desk.

What assurance — other than the word of the proven champion liar of the world's proven champion liar of a country — do we have that Russia is not still pulling another double-cross in Cuba?

Our State Department has let it be known that it is satisfied, and obviously wants to drop the matter.

I don't — and I don't think the American public should.

If there was really nothing much to the sub base reports, the Administration should come out and say so — with a full rundown on what caused the reports and the White House warning to Moscow on Sept. 25.

If there WAS fire behind all that smoke, as there is certainly reason to suspect, our citizens deserve to know in equal detail just how that fire was put out.

If, indeed, it has been put out.