

U.S. 'CRISIS CENTER' KEEPS DAILY VIGIL

State Department Post Has
'Dr. Strangelove' Aspects

By NAN ROBERTSON

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 26—At first glance, it looks like the Walter Cronkite newsroom millions of Americans see on television every night.

There are Teletype machines, maps, wall clocks giving the times around the world, multi-color phones, shirt-sleeved assistants and tables piled with printed messages.

This is the State Department's closely guarded Operations Center—really a "crisis center." The seventh-floor command post jumped yesterday in the wake of the seizure of the American intelligence vessel Pueblo by North Korea on Tuesday.

In it works, 24 hours a day, a series of five-man teams. The center was set up in April, 1961, after the Cuban Bay of Pigs debacle. It is electronically hooked up with the Pentagon's National Military Command Center, commonly called "the tank"; and the White House's "Situation Room."

300 Messages a Day

On a normal day, more than 300 messages, all of them urgent, flow into the State Department center. During the Arab-Israeli war last June, the number went up to 1,000 daily.

The night senior watch officer must decide whether to wake the President or the Secretary of State if a crisis develops.

The last year has been particularly hectic, according to the center's deputy director, James E. Ralph. He ticked off the upheavals in Greece, Yemen, the Middle East, the Congo, Nigeria, Vietnam and Cyprus and the international financial turmoil set off by the devaluation of the British pound.

A lieutenant colonel or commander from the Pentagon is part of every shift at State and there is a civilian diplomat on watch at "the tank"—each making sure that his department is being told what he thinks it should.

Wall Screens and Phones

The "Dr. Strangelove" aspects of the Operations Center tend to dispel the first impression of a TV newsroom. There is the small, soundproofed "Telecon Room," where Secretary of State Dean Rusk and other Cabinet officers "talk" to American outposts via wall screens that instantly flash incoming and outgoing questions and answers.

There are Teletype machines that encode and decode the top-secret messages transmitted through them.

There are the telephones—some marked "not secure"—to warn those on the line that their conversations are not being scrambled.

There is the white phone, which rings at the White House Situation Room as soon as the man at State picks it up. Alongside are the gold phone for the Pentagon and the powder-blue phone for the Operations Center at the Central Intelligence Agency.