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(U)Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

(U)A Reconsideration of the Role of SIGINT during the Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962 (Part 2 of 4)

(b) (1)
(b) (3) - 50 USC 403
(b) (3) - 18 USC 798
(b) (3) - E.O. 13526

~~(S//SI)~~ What role did American SIGINT play during the crisis?

~~(S//SI)~~ In the previous article, it was recounted how the Soviets perceived a strategic threat to their position around the world. To redress this imbalance, Soviet premier Khrushchev ordered the secret installation of ballistic missiles in Cuba. Part of a larger buildup of Soviet conventional arms, and those of the Cuban military, this operation, known as *Anadyr'*, was detected by U.S. intelligence resources. U.S. SIGINT noted the increase of Soviet shipping [redacted] However, the installation of the missiles was missed. Yet, the Soviet run of luck would end, and the missiles were found.

(U) On 14 October 1962, a U-2 aircraft flew over western Cuba, the first such flight in nearly 6 weeks. A previous 5 September flight had not seen anything unusual, though Soviet surface-to-air missile (SAM) installations had been observed in the resulting photographs. But the SAMs, the SA-2s (Grail), were defensive weapons, and were in keeping with Moscow's declarations about its intentions to protect Cuba from an American invasion. Two other flights had been canceled due to cloud cover. On 10 October, Republican senator Kenneth Keating of New York charged that the Soviets were putting IRBMs in Cuba. It is not certain where Keating got this information, but Cuban émigrés may have informed him of reports of missile bases. No one in the Kennedy administration seemed particularly concerned about the buildup in Cuba, but for one critical exception: the Director of Central Intelligence, John McCone. McCone, a conservative Republican who replaced Allen Dulles after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, had been suspicious of the SAM emplacements. These missiles always protected important installations. What was in Cuba to warrant the missiles? While on his honeymoon in Paris, he was so certain something was up, he peppered his deputy at CIA Headquarters, Major General Marshall "Pat" Carter (later a director, NSA), with messages requesting more U-2 flights. He believed that the Soviets were planning to put offensive ballistic missiles in Cuba. As contemporaries recalled, people rolled their eyes whenever a message from McCone arrived. But on 14 October a flight took off for Cuba.

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06-12-2009, FOIA Case # 52567

(U) The flight's film was transported to Washington, DC, for analysis. That night and into the next day, photographic interpreters identified the partially constructed launching sites for SS-4 (Sandal) IRBMs. On the evening of 15 October, Ray Cline, the Deputy Director for Intelligence, CIA, notified McGeorge Bundy, the president's national security adviser. The next morning at 9:00 A.M., Bundy told the president. Later that morning, the photographic interpreters briefed the president and his top advisors. It was decided to keep this information as closely held as possible. Only a handful of outsiders were brought into the secret. This group would be known as the "Executive Committee" or EXCOMM for short. (The caveat "Psalm" was assigned to any intelligence about the missiles.)

(U) Kennedy at first favored attacking the missile sites. The problem was locating every one. He was told at the second EXCOMM session that photographing the entire island would take weeks because of the cloud cover. Thanks to information from Oleg Penkovsky, a Soviet colonel turned spy for the West, the U.S. knew much about the capabilities of the IRBMs – range, payload, launch time, and the time needed to mount the nuclear warhead. Kennedy realized that any missiles missed in an initial strike could be launched before follow-up sorties could destroy them. Most of the southern U.S., including Washington, was within the 1,100-mile range of the SS-4.

~~(S//SI)~~ The question for the Kennedy administration was to determine the proper response. Knowing about the missiles, and that the Soviets were unaware of the American discovery, the president and his advisers had some time to examine options. It was during an EXCOMM session on the evening of 16 October that the idea of a blockade or quarantine was first discussed. By 19 October most of the EXCOMM members were leaning towards this approach. The quarantine, of course, did not solve all of the administration's problems. (A new one was added when additional U-2 flights discovered that the Soviets were putting up launchers for SS-5 MRBMs with a range of over 2,000 miles, which put all of the U.S. under a nuclear threat.) It would not force the Soviets to remove the missiles and warheads already in Cuba. The Soviet buildup could be halted by the quarantine, unless the Soviets wished to challenge it. But there were problems here, as well. SIGINT had

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~~(S//SI)~~ At NSA, ever since the discovery of the missiles, there had been a rush to meet the demands for fast and accurate reporting. Both A Group, which had responsibility for the Soviet target, and [redacted] where the Cuban mission resided, issued reports independent of one another. An A Group element that worked the Soviet [redacted]

[redacted] A crisis command center was organized. A daily electrical product detailing the status of all Soviet forces was initiated. The Oxford was ordered to stay in the area despite the perceived threat to it from Soviet surface-to-surface missile batteries located at points on the Cuban coastline. The Director, NSA, General Gordon Blake, urged the Army Security Agency to complete its intercept sites in Florida.

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~~(S//SI)~~ On 22 October, the day of Kennedy's speech announcing the quarantine, 25 Soviet ships were en route to Cuba. Later that day, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] McCone also reported that electronic systems, mostly radar, at the missile sites were active. Soviet forces worldwide were on a high state of readiness, but no troop deployments had been detected. Both sides waited for the other's next move.

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~~(S//SI)~~ Early on October 23, SIGINT reported the first signs that something might be happening. The control station for Odessa shipping notified all ships that now Moscow would be transmitting orders to them. The rest of the day, [REDACTED] messages were sent to all of the ships moving towards Cuba. Not knowing what was in the messages left the president and his advisers wondering just what the ships might do. Forcing the quarantine line seemed a reasonable possibility. Soviet submarines were in the area; in fact, one would soon be close enough to escort one of the Soviet ships, the *Kimovsk*. The *Oxford* reported that many MiG jet fighters were being flown by Russian pilots. It also reported that [REDACTED]

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(U) The morning of 24 October proved to be the first hopeful turning point, but it did not start out that way. At the 10:00 A.M. meeting of the EXCOMM, McCone told the president that he just had been handed a note from the Office of Naval Intelligence that said all six Soviet ships identified "in Cuban waters" had either stopped or reversed course. Kennedy asked immediately, "What do you mean, *Cuban waters*?" McCone could not answer that and he left the room to find out what the navy meant by "Cuban waters." While McCone was out of the room, the discussion turned to the problem of how the navy was going to deal with the Soviet submarines. As Secretary of Defense McNamara explained the Navy's method to force the Soviet submarines to the surface, Robert Kennedy noted that "these few minutes were the time of greatest worry by the president. His hand went up to his face & covered his mouth and he closed his fist. His eyes were tense, almost gray, and we just stared at each other across the table."

(U) McCone returned to the room with the explanation that "Cuban waters" meant 30 degrees west longitude (McCone probably got this wrong. He may have meant 30 degrees north latitude; the correct west longitudinal point would have been about 55 degrees.), and

that the ships mentioned by the navy were all east [north] of this line, which corresponded to the quarantine line. The conversation in the conference room shifted to the question of what to do with ships already near Cuba. The decision was to let them go since none seemed to be carrying anything important. (Unknown to the group, the *Alexandrovsk*, which was carrying nuclear warheads, had slipped in under the quarantine and reached Cuba.) It was at this point that Secretary of State Dean Rusk quipped to National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, "We are eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked."

~~(S//SI)~~ The Soviet ships were tracked by two methods: direction finding (D/F) and ship's own position report. Both had advantages and disadvantages when it came to determining the location of the Soviet vessels. A network of navy D/F stations along the Atlantic littoral could locate the Soviet ships. However, D/F was an unreliable method for determining if a ship had stopped or had just reversed course. D/F plots could locate a ship within a 25- to 90-nautical mile radius, which meant that a ship could be somewhere within a circle as large as 25,000 square miles of ocean. Clearly, D/F could not inform the administration of immediate changes by the Soviet ships. In fact, at one point Defense Secretary McNamara told the president that the location of a certain ship of interest was unclear because of the poor D/F "tolerances."

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(U) By 27 October, the crisis was still not resolved. Although most Soviet ships had turned around, or those with nonmilitary supplies had continued to Cuba after being searched by navy combatants, the Soviets still had not responded to Kennedy's demand that the missiles in Cuba be dismantled. That afternoon, the JCS drafted a recommendation for the president to authorize an air strike against the missile sites to begin either the next day or on 29 October. At the same meeting, the EXCOMM learned about a U-2 mission that had strayed over the Soviet Union. It had escaped, but the incident was enough to send shivers through the committee members.

~~(S//SI)~~ Later, at the same meeting, the president learned of the downing of a U-2 in eastern Cuba. Over the years, this incident has generated much discussion over who did it.

Initially, it was believed that the Russians acted on their own. The Russians operated all SAM sites. The Cubans manned their own AAA sites. Based on some scattered SIGINT that was reviewed two years after the event, it was suggested that there had been some commotion, perhaps even a firefight, at a Soviet SAM installation that morning. It was further speculated that Cubans had seized the missile battery and had fired the SAM at the plane. However, the intercept was fragmentary and could be interpreted many ways, quite likely that thieves had been detected at the SAM site. Information from Russian archives has set the story straight. The day before, convinced of a possible air strike (recall the JCS recommendation to JFK for a strike), General Pliyev had informed Moscow of his intent to defend his forces. Moscow concurred. On the morning of 27 October, the U-2 was detected by Soviet and Cuban radar. Cuban gunners fired ineffectively at the plane. The Soviet missile battery commander, fearful of an air assault, tried to contact Pliyev through the chain of command. But Pliyev was unavailable. His deputy and the air defense commander, suspecting the U-2 flight was a prelude to an attack, approved the launch. Shortly after 10:00 A.M, an SA-2 brought down the U-2.

(U) Administration officials wondered if the shutdown was intentional. Intelligence from Cuba suggested that forces there were going to a war footing. Washington did not realize that Moscow expected an imminent U.S. attack on Cuba. At this point, the president decided to delay a response until the next day. This temporizing proved critical. That evening, President Kennedy dispatched a letter to the Russians that contained a deal: they dismantle the missiles and the Americans would end the quarantine and renounce any attack on Cuba. Also, that evening, the president sent his brother to meet with Soviet ambassador Anatoli Dobrynin with a secret offer: If the Soviets pulled out their missiles, the U.S. would dismantle its missile bases in Europe and Turkey. This bargain ended the crisis. On the morning of 28 October, Khrushchev publicly accepted the offer in Kennedy's letter. Later, he secretly dispatched another message through Dobrynin accepting the removal of the missiles in Turkey. It was, as Dean Rusk noted, "the day of the doves."

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Last Modified: by nsr
Last Reviewed: February 28, 2003
Next Review: 365 days

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DATED: 24 FEB 1998
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