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PERISCOPE

A Nuclear Blast—or 'Zoo Animals'?

U.S. scientists now lean toward concluding that last September's mysterious flash in the atmosphere over the South Atlantic was a natural phenomenon rather than a nuclear explosion triggered by South Africa, as Washington first suspected. A U.S. Vela satellite registered the flash, and astronomers and physicists investigating it for the White House have since studied 500,000 Vela signals recorded over the past decade. They discovered that so-called "zoo animals"—signals of unknown natural origin—often display some of the same characteristics as nuclear explosions. The scientists are also impressed by data from the Pioneer 10 space probe indicating that meteoroids in outer space are far more numerous than previously surmised. With no evidence of a nuclear blast, what the Vela saw might have been a zoo animal—perhaps sunlight glinting off a passing meteoroid.

Changing Puppets in Afghanistan

After weeks of rumors, Western intelligence sources say they expect the Kremlin to depose Babrak Karmal, the puppet leader it installed as President of Afghanistan only three months ago. The Soviets are shopping around for a more charismatic figure who might improve morale in the dispirited country, while still toeing the Moscow line. Several contenders have been handpicked from a group of Afghan leftists recently released from prison, and one or two top candidates have moved into the Soviet Embassy in Kabul to await the final decision.

Finding a Flaw in the MX Defense

Defense Department analysts have only recently uncovered a flaw in one of the most highly touted features of the proposed MX mobile-missile program. As a result, the Pentagon is quietly abandoning the MX's "dash capability"—once considered the ultimate safeguard against an enemy attack—in favor of a different defense system that happens to cost $2 billion less. Dash capability would have enabled the missiles to "dash" from one shelter to another in order to survive a Soviet missile attack. But the Pentagon now realizes that the Soviets could launch a small initial attack and then use spy satellites to spot the shelters to which the MX's have dashed. A second wave of Soviet missiles could then be targeted on those shelters. The substitute system, which would keep some of the missiles constantly in motion, doesn't solve the problem entirely—but at least it will be much cheaper.

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