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Why intelligence on Cuba was inadequate

If President Carter and his officials are being reticent in their criticism of the intelligence delay in spotting the Soviet brigade in Cuba, it is because their decisions contributed heavily to the failure.

Carter himself bears the main responsibility because he reduced intelligence coverage of Cuba as one of his first acts in office, and signalled that he was more interested in normalizing relations with Castro than in discovering what the Soviets were doing there.

In January 1977, Carter cancelled as provocative the overflights by the SR71, the successor plane to the U2. By this act, Carter denied to the intelligence analysts photography more detailed and accurate than any the orbiting satellites can produce.

More significantly, this decision flashed a signal to the intelligence community that information on Cuba no longer had high priority, so the risks of collecting it were not worth taking. While Carter pursued detente with Castro, scarce technical and human intelligence resources were shifted to more urgent needs.

It was only in the spring of 1979 that Castro's active support of the Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua re-focused the eyes of American intelligence on Cuba. An increased analytic effort

finally paid off in the conclusive identification of the Soviet brigade on Aug. 17. If this discovery had been made earlier, there would have been more time for quiet negotiations, and SALT II would not have become entangled in the outcome.

In retrospect, a second mistake by the Carter administration on coming to office was the decision to abolish the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, (PFIAB), and to ignore its final report. First established by President Eisenhower, this distinguished group of private citizens and prominent scientists had been a source of objective advice to successive presidents on the workings of the intelligence community.

Its swan song was a warning to President Ford in December 1976 that the U.S. had become too heavily dependent on surveillance satellites and other technical means for its intelligence. The board argued that Soviet technological progress and increasing military strength made it more important than ever before to recruit human agents inside potentially hostile governments to report on their intentions and on new weapons in the early stages of secret development.

While avoiding the embarrassment of human

agents who can be arrested and publicly tried, satellite surveillance provides marvellously accurate photography and is an essential tool of modern intelligence. But there are strict limits to what it can accomplish. Photography can only present a static picture of what lies beneath the open sky.

It cannot forecast future intentions or distinguish the nationality of soldiers using similar equipment. One well-placed human agent in Castro's government could have provided early warning of the brigade's presence and described what its true purpose was.

Disregarding the PFIAB's advice, the Carter administration has allowed Admiral Turner to cut back on the size of the CIA's Directorate of Operations, forcing into early retirement many of its more able officers. The diminished espionage capability against Cuba is a reflection of past priorities. Until the recent crisis, the early amount budgeted for information collection on Cuba by humans, rather than technology, was a clearly inadequate \$160,000.

At the start of his administration, Carter also made a serious mistake when he rejected George Bush's offer to stay on for a transitional year as director of Central Intelligence. Insisting on

his own nominee to replace the competent Bush, Carter broke with all previous precedent by treating the CIA directorship as a political plum to be distributed with each change of administration.

When his first choice for the job, Theodore Sorensen, ran into trouble in the Senate, Carter came up with a quick-fix solution in the person of his Annapolis classmate, Stansfield Turner. There is now a remarkable unanimity among Turner's colleagues on the National Security Council, in the congressional intelligence committees and throughout the intelligence community that Carter's choice of Turner was unfortunate. He has somehow managed to offend and antagonize both colleagues and subordinates. Cooperative relations with allied intelligence services have been damaged.

It may be officially denied but Carter aides are beginning to look for his replacement. Due to his role as witness in the SALT debate, Turner's departure must be delayed until early next year so Carter has time to find a civilian successor of proven competence who would be acceptable to both Democrats and Republicans.

By seeking a replacement who can win broad, bipartisan support, Carter has a chance to repair the damage of the past 30 months.