

## When Intelligence Made a Difference

— COLD WAR —

### HUMINT Reports Raised Suspensions about Soviet Missiles in Cuba

Gary B. Keeley

On 21 September 1962, CIA disseminated two reports from human sources (HUMINT) that marked the start the Cuban missile crisis, although nobody knew it yet. One report gave the first credible intelligence about the possible presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, and the other featured a senior Cuban official declaring that “We will fight to the death, and perhaps we can win because we have everything including atomic weapons.” This pair of reports were among eight or ten significant HUMINT reports in the second half of September that persuaded the US Intelligence Community (IC) to include Cuba among a Corona imagery satellite’s targets and recommend that a U-2 reconnaissance aircraft fly over western Cuba to seek evidence of missile sites.

The United States had not overflown Cuba since August because of the presence of Soviet-supplied surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries. But the new and accumulating HUMINT reporting suggested the presence of nuclear-capable missiles on the island. After some discussion in late September at the Defense and Central Intelligence Agencies (DIA and CIA), and soon involving senior Pentagon officials and the White House, a U-2 flew across western Cuba on 14 October. It returned photographic evidence confirming the HUMINT reporting, at which point US officials knew there was a crisis.

The story of the failure of US intelligence to detect Soviet shipments to Cuba of medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBM) and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM) before mid-October 1962 is well known, as is the U-2’s discovery of them. The Intelligence Community (IC) did not detect Soviet



Soviet nuclear missile site at San Cristobal (14 October U-2 image).

intentions to ship missiles and nuclear weapons to Cuba, nor their preparation, loading, transport, or unloading in Cuban ports.

The extreme security and deception measures the Soviets took in what were already closed societies in the USSR and Cuba made detection of the Soviet initiative unlikely. Many Soviets and Cubans were involved in the shipments; but almost none knew what it was they were pursuing.<sup>1</sup> US intelligence saw a massive military build-up but had no evidence the Soviets were transporting nuclear-tipped missiles.

Much has been written about the failure of analysts to imagine that the Soviets would choose to deploy nuclear weapons to Cuba, but had analysts suggested with no concrete evidence that such a plan was underway no policymaker would have accepted the thesis.<sup>2</sup> This is demonstrable because none other than DCI McCone asserted loudly and frequently,

1. James H. Hansen, “Soviet Deception in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (2002); James G. Blight and David A. Welch, eds., *Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, London: Frank Cass, 1998, pp. 100-2.

2. Blight and Welch, *Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, pp. 23, 28, 35, 158-162.

with plenty of imagination and common sense, but without evidence, that the Soviets were deploying nuclear missiles to Cuba. Without evidence, however, the administration did not accept his conjectures. Had CIA analysts chosen a similar course, intelligence customers would have likewise dismissed their concerns.

Less familiar to most students of the missile crisis, but declassified and available to the public since the late 1980s,<sup>3</sup> is the fact that HUMINT reporting spurred the U-2 flight that took the photos that revealed the missiles. Had CIA's agents on the island not submitted credible reports of suspected missile sightings, it is questionable that a U-2 would have flown over Cuba on 14 October, just as none had since August due to the concerns expressed by National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk about the vulnerability of the aircraft to SAMs.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Asserting that HUMINT reporting prompted the U-2 flight is not new. However, the blinding celebrity of the U-2 and its photos on 14 October have made it easy to forget or downplay the critical role that HUMINT played in advancing discussion about the need for the flight. That HUMINT first discovered the missiles has still not fully entered public awareness despite the efforts of many authors over more than 30 years, who have highlighted the HUMINT. It is worth reminding readers here, in chronological order, of the number of times authors have demonstrated that human sources first reported the missiles: Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969, pp. 28-29; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1987, p. 14; Peter S. Usowski, "John McCone and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1988, pp. 554, 557, 560; Raymond L. Garthoff in James G. Blight and David A. Welch, eds., *On the Brink*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1989, pp. 41, 44; Dino A. Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball*, New York: Random House, 1990, pp. 109, 148-155, 164-173, 280-283; Mary S. McAuliffe, editor, *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, Washington, D.C.: CIA History Staff, October 1992; Alexander Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997, p. 201; Blight and Welch, *Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, London: Frank Cass, 1998, pp. 22-23, 44-46, 52-55, 180-183, 188-198 (with Raymond Garthoff the most prominent and detailed in his discussion of the HUMINT in his article on pages 18-63, particularly pages 22-24 and 44-46); James J. Wirtz, "Organizing for Crisis Intelligence," *Intelligence and National Security* Vol. 13, No. 3, 1998, p. 138; Richard Helms, *A Look over My Shoulder*, New York: Random House, 2003, pp. 213, 215; David S. Robarge, *John McCone as Director of Central Intelligence 1961-1965*, Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005 – although not declassified and available to the public until 2015, pp. 103-104, 107, 109, 117; Michael B. Petersen, *Legacy of Ashes, Trial by Fire: The Origins of the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Cuban Missile Crisis Crucible*, DIA Historical Research Support Branch, Washington, DC, 2011, pp. 16, 17, 26, 32; David M. Barrett and Max Holland, *Blind Over Cuba*, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012, pp. 10-11, 14-15; Brian Latell, "American Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis" Seleous Foundation for Public Policy Research, 1 November 2012; Michael E. Weaver, "The Relationship between Diplomacy and Military Force," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 38, No. 1, January 2014, pp. 144, 147; Joseph W. Caddell, Jr., "Corona over Cuba," *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2016, pp. 417-419, 423; Joseph Caddell, "Discovering Soviet Missiles in Cuba," *War on the Rocks*, October 19, 2017; Sean D. Naylor, "Operation Cobra" *Yahoo News*, January 23, 2019; and David Wolman, "The Once-Classified Tale of Juanita Moody," *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2021.

4. The vulnerability of the U-2 was shown on May 1, 1960 when Francis Gary Powers' aircraft was downed by a SA-2 near Sverdlovsk, USSR,

Before the missile crisis, CIA's assets on the island had reported on many occasions that they had sighted missiles, but all of the reports had been vague or impossible for DIA and CIA all-source analysts to confirm, or the weapons were determined to be short-range tactical missiles or SAMs. Many authors have criticized CIA's agents on the island for producing approximately 3,500 inaccurate reports of missiles in 1961-1962, or at least no credible reports of long-range missiles. In fact, many of those reports were accurate sightings of surface-to-air or conventional short-range surface-to-surface missiles, and the analysts were able to confirm those reports.

SIGINT and HUMINT provided large volumes of fact-based single-source reporting (often erroneously termed "raw intelligence") demonstrating a robust Soviet military support effort. Analysts dutifully studied and reported it, but saw no evidence of the presence of nuclear-capable ballistic missiles. Although nobody in the IC knew it at the time, none of the reports of sightings of ballistic missiles before mid-September could have been accurate because no ballistic missiles had yet arrived on island. The analysts were correct to dismiss them.

The decades-long emphasis on the thousands of inaccurate HUMINT reports about missiles has obscured the more important measurement of the effectiveness of CIA's agents on the island: What did assets report after Soviet missiles had arrived? The date of the arrival of the first large missile-related equipment and of the first missiles has been known for some time to be 8-9 September 1962.<sup>5</sup> Further, the missiles did not move out of Cuban ports and reach their deployment locations west of Havana until 17-18 September.<sup>6</sup> These dates, too rarely discussed, are of the utmost importance in understanding events. The agents should be evaluated not on what they reported earlier in the year when there were no ballistic missiles on the island, but what they reported and how rapidly they did so once the missiles had arrived in Cuba.

Seen from the date the missiles arrived in port and later at their deployment sites, CIA's agents were neither incompetent nor absent. CIA's agents began reporting the presence of large ballistic missiles

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resulting in an embarrassing diplomatic incident for the United States.

5. Richard Lehman, Memorandum for the DCI: CIA Handling of the Soviet Build-up in Cuba, 1 July-16 October 1962 (14 November 1962) CIA-80B01676R001700180076-4, CIA CREST, p. 15 (declassified for McAuliffe's volume in 1992 and the version cited here declassified again in 2004); Raymond L. Garthoff in Blight and Welch, *Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 23; Hansen, "Soviet Deception in the Cuban Missile Crisis," p. 54; Caddell, "Corona over Cuba," p. 423 (citing the Lehman report, NIC and PFIAB chronologies).

6. Barrett and Holland, *Blind Over Cuba*, p. 10.







## INFORMATION REPORT INFORMATION REPORT

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HR70-14

~~C-O-N-F-I-D-E-N-T-I-A-L~~

COUNTRY Cuba

REPORT NO. [REDACTED]

SUBJECT Possible Missile Site in Havana

DATE DISTR 27 Sep 62

*(Soviet Military Convoy)*

NO. PAGES 2

REFERENCES [REDACTED]

DATE OF INFO To 12 Sep 62

PLACE &amp; DATE ACQ [REDACTED]

THIS IS UNEVALUATED INFORMATION

SOURCE Cuban national, [REDACTED]

1. After dark on 12 Sep 62, I was driving east on Avenida 23, Marianao, Havana, when I observed and counted 20 Soviet trucks towing 20 long trailers going west on Avenida 23. The truck convoy was preceded by a jeep containing militiamen. The trucks were driven by Soviets in civilian clothes -- short-sleeved shirts in various colors.
2. As the truck convoy neared its destination at Campo Libertad, the militia jeep was waved off, and the Soviet trucks and trailers proceeded into Campo Libertad.
3. The trucks appeared to be the GAZ, ZIL-157, canvas-covered. [Source described these and later identified them from photographs in [REDACTED] In the backs of the trucks could be seen sealed black boxes or cases of various sizes. I do not know what these boxes contained.
4. The trailers, the longest I have ever seen in Cuba, were two-axle, four-wheeled. They were about 65 to 70 feet in length and about eight feet in width.
5. I believe the transport trailers were carrying large missiles, so long that the tail end extended over the end of the trailer. I would guess that the missiles were a few feet longer than the trailers. The missiles were covered with wood and canvas. From the tail end of the missile it looked as if the bottom and two sides of the missile had a wooden frame, and the entire missile was canvas-covered. It looked as if the tail end of the canvas silhouetted the two top fins of the four fins of the missile. The top of the canvas-covered missile was taller than the top of the truck towing it. I am not positive that the trailer was carrying

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DIVISION-HR70-14 DATE: 05-17-2012

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INFORMATION REPORT INFORMATION REPORT

UNCLASSIFIED  
Approved for Release: 2012/11/30Analysts read a report about atomic weapons on the same day as the report above.<sup>1</sup>

1. Possible Presence of Atomic Weapons in Cuba [redacted] TDCS-3/523, 169 21 September 1962. The report states that a human source agent acquired the information cited here in "early September." This report does not appear in McAuliffe's 1992 volume but, like all of the reports cited here, was re-released about 20 years after her volume; CIA approved this particular report for release in September 2005.



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### CLASSIFICATION → DISSEMINATION CONTROLS

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COUNTRY CUBA/USSR

REPORT NO. TOCS -3/523,160

SUBJECT POSSIBLE PRESENCE OF ATOMIC WEAPONS  
IN CUBA

DATE DISTR. 21 SEPTEMBER 1962

PRECEDENCE ROUTING

DATE OF INFO. PARA. 1: EARLY SEPTEMBER 1962  
 PARA. 2: LATE AUGUST 1962

REFERENCE OF 25371

PLACE IN  
DATE ACQ.  
APPRAISAL

FIELD REPORT NO.

THIS IS UNEVALUATED INFORMATION. SOURCE CREDITS ARE DEFINITIVE. APPRAISAL OF CONTENT IS TENTATIVE

SOURCE

2.

FERNANDEZ REPLIED:

"MY DIE IS CAST. WE WILL FIGHT TO THE DEATH AND PERHAPS WE CAN WIN BECAUSE WE HAVE EVERYTHING INCLUDING ATOMIC WEAPONS." ( ) COCENT. FERNANDEZ IS CHIEF OF WAR PLANS OF THE CUBAN ARMY.)

2. THE AIR BASE IN NUMBER ONE WESTERN DISTRICT HAS BEEN DIVIDED, LEAVING A SMALL PART TO A SMALL NAVY GARRISON WHILE THE REMAINING AREA IS BEING TURNED INTO A NUCLEAR WEAPONS BASE. THE WORK, WHICH CONTINUES DAY AND NIGHT, IS BEING DONE BY ABOUT 1000 SOVIET TECHNICIANS IN COMBINED LABOR GROUPS.

[ ] COMMENT. [ ] MAY BE REFERRING TO THE MARINE NAVAL AREA, IN WHICH A SUBORDINATE NAVAL POST AT BOCA DOMINICA (N 23-01.12, W 82-49.52)

### CLASSIFICATION - DISSEMINATION CONTROLS

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time was limited and Soviet and Cuban security services had locked down the island.

Analysts considered the new reporting for a few days until similar reports from other agents arrived. Soon, discussions were underway in Washington about identifying a way to corroborate the agent reports. A Corona satellite was launched on 29 September with one of its missions being coverage of western Cuba.<sup>8</sup> The camera's resolution was insufficient to reveal missiles or missile-related equipment but its targeting against Cuba shows that the IC was serious about confirming the agent reports. The IC did not allow the limitation of the satellite's resolution to show missiles to deter further investigation and recommended a U-2 overflight. That flight was scheduled by 9 October and flew on the 14th, famously photographing the missiles.

The employment of multiple collection methods worked effectively and discovered the missiles not long before they would have become operational and much more difficult to remove. In this instance, HUMINT reporting aroused suspicions that sent the U-2 aloft, where its camera confirmed the HUMINT. Without human sources on the ground, the discovery of the missiles probably would have come too late. Although the well-known story of the U-2 photography – IMINT – being the source of the confirmation is accurate, it is not the entire story. HUMINT reported the missiles and justified the risk of sending a U-2 into harm's way.<sup>9</sup> These reports began to flow into CIA and DIA as CIA's assets

8. Caddell, "Corona over Cuba," entire article, particularly page 417.

9. The sources cited here vary: Some say that just one or two of the reports were critical; others say that perhaps eight were important.

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**CONFIDENTIAL**

COUNTRY	Cuba	REPORT NO.	OO- X-3,219,109
SUBJECT	Sighting of Military Convoy	DATE DISC.	4 Oct 62
		NO. PAGES	1
		REFERENCES	

DATE OF INFO. 19 Sep 62

PLACE & DATE ACQ. [redacted]

THIS IS UNEVALUATED INFORMATION

SOURCE [redacted]

1. [redacted] Sep 62 at about 0600 hours, [redacted] a military convoy proceeding southwest along Camaguey-Vertientes highway (9-30) from Camaguey toward Vertientes. [redacted] 95535, Sheet 4579 I, Series BT23, Bl 1-NB/. The convoy consisted of six tractors and semitrailers and three rocket launcher-type trucks.
2. Each of the six trucks and semitrailers were carrying two cylindrical objects approximately 40 feet long by three feet in diameter covered with a green nylon-like snug cover. These cylindrical objects were laying flat on the cargo bed. [redacted]

Following the tractors and semitrailers, [redacted] three trucks, [redacted] Rocket Launchers M-13. [redacted]

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encountered evidence of missiles.<sup>10</sup> One report laid out the famous "trapezoid" within which the missiles were emplaced and over which the U-2 was directed on 14 October.<sup>11</sup>

Another significant agent report apparently reported a bragging by the personal pilot of Fidel Castro on 9 September.

10. See the collection of declassified documents about the Cuban Missile Crisis that the CIA History Staff prepared and declassified in 1992, CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962. It includes the full versions of the reports received from agents on the island.

11. Message declassified by CIA. McAuliffe, *Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 1962, 103.



[Redacted] PERSONAL PILOT OF FIDEL CASTRO, [Redacted] “WE HAVE 40-MILE RANGE GUIDED MISSILES, BOTH SURFACE-TO-SURFACE AND SURFACE-TO-AIR, AND WE HAVE A RADAR SYSTEM WHICH COVERS, SECTOR BY SECTOR, ALL OF THE CUBAN AIR SPACE AND (BEYOND) AS FAR AS FLORIDA. THERE ARE ALSO MANY MISSILE RAMPS FOR INTERMEDIATE RANGE ROCKETS. THEY DON’T KNOW WHAT IS AWAITING THEM.”<sup>12</sup>

One report, alone, was probably the most significant single HUMINT report ahead of the crisis. All-source analysts were on alert after reading it on 21 September. The asset described what appeared to be 65-70 feet long missiles in transit. The source had seen the missiles four to five days after they had arrived in Cuba but was unable to communicate with CIA officers for several more days.

Another key report, in the hands of analysts by 1 October (and reissued on 4 October), confirmed the one above that had been disseminated on 21 September. The two separate assets had seen either the same convoy or similar convoys of large, long loads driving the Cuban countryside. Discussions about a U-2 mission had already been underway and, at this point, the IC and the Pentagon began to actively prepare for the U-2 flight.<sup>13</sup>

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12. *Comments of Cuban Pilot Concerning Presence of Guided Missiles in Cuba* TDCS-3/522,948 20 September 1962. The report states that a human source agent acquired the information on 9 September; McAuliffe, *Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 1962, p. 105. Released by CIA September 2005.

13. *Sighting of Military Convoy* OO-K-3/219,189 1 October 1962 (and reissued on 4 October). The report states that a human source agent acquired the information on 19 September; This report does not appear in McAuliffe’s 1992 volume but, like all of the reports cited here, was re-released about 20 years after her volume; CIA approved this particular report for release in September 2005.

This episode reveals an important lesson for historians of diplomatic and military affairs: It suggests that the examination of fact-based single-source, non-analytic intelligence reporting, whether sourced to HUMINT, IMINT or SIGINT, during any number of crises, may alter current understandings of what occurred in many past events. In the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and despite the fact that the role of HUMINT has been known, per footnote 3, many continue to give “credit” solely to the U-2. This reexamination of officially released versions of the original single-source HUMINT reports makes it clear that agents on the ground performed well once missiles were physically on the island and that CIA’s agents initially discovered the missiles, not the U-2. The IC has known this from the beginning – 1962 – and the citations in footnote 3 present numerous unclassified accounts that correctly understood the facts. Those authors were aware of the original HUMINT reports and understood that they modified the received narrative.

HUMINT, not the U-2, “discovered” the missiles after which the U-2 “confirmed” their presence. That is how intelligence often works. What customers of intelligence knew and when they knew it often remains opaque without not only declassified all-source analysis but also declassified single-source reports.

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