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The Nixon Administration and the Cienfuegos crisis of 1970: crisis-management of a non-crisis?

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Abstract. This article employs newly declassified documents from the National Archives in Washington and London to re-examine foreign policymaking of the Nixon Administration during the Cienfuegos crisis of 1970. The article seeks to answer two fundamental questions with regard to policy decision-making during the crisis: why did the Administration pursue a public policy of 'business as usual' while cloaking the crisis in extreme secrecy, and how was this achieved? Answers to these questions can be found in the unique situation the Administration found itself during the 'Autumn of Crises', and in Kissinger's manipulation of NSC mechanisms and procedures, respectively.

In the autumn of 1970 an impending crisis over the buildup of Soviet facilities in Cuba presented President Richard Nixon with the perfect opportunity to publicly demonstrate his renowned hard line on Communism. The events surrounding the Cuban bay of Cienfuegos had the initial hallmarks of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962: American U-2 planes identified the buildup of Soviet facilities in Cuba; and a Soviet naval task force was spotted en route to Cuba. Additionally, in both cases the American administration was recovering from the consequences of other recent crises – in 1962 under President Kennedy, the Berlin Crisis and the Bay of Pigs Invasion, and in 1970 under President Nixon, the incursion into Cambodia and the Jordanian Crisis.

Given the similarity between the two Cuban crises of 1962 and 1970, one might expect Nixon to follow the footsteps of his predecessor in dealing with the threat from Moscow, especially when taking into account Nixon's well-established vociferous stand on Communism. Furthermore, the fact that Kennedy's approach to the crisis of 1962 was generally judged 'successful' also strengthened the case for a similar style of crisis management in 1970. However Nixon chose not to play up the impending crisis the way Kennedy had done eight years earlier. In his memoirs Nixon asserts that the potential implications of the crisis were equivalent to those of the 1962 crisis – and had it been managed differently, the Cienfuegos crisis could have easily become known as the 'Cuban Nuclear Submarine Crisis of 1970'.[1]

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[1] Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), p. 489.

The different outcome of the 1970 crisis was closely connected to the issue of foreign policymaking. This article will argue that the management of the Cuban crisis of 1970 differed from that of 1962 primarily because of the unique position the Nixon administration found itself *vis-à-vis* the Soviets during the 'Autumn of Crises' of 1970. Furthermore, using recently released documents from the Nixon Presidential Material Project in the National Archives, as well as the National Archives in London, this article will also demonstrate how the mechanism of foreign policy-making made a difference, how Nixon ensured that the situation did not get out of control and that a 'crisis mood' was discouraged.

This article will therefore answer two questions: first, faced with an impending crisis that had all the characteristics of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, under similar circumstances and with equal urgency, *why* did the Nixon administration choose to downgrade its significance?; second, *how* was it done? Stated differently, what unique mechanisms and procedures were used to prevent a crisis mood developing in the minds of Washington's policymakers?

The article is based upon primary sources that until recently were not available to scholars. So far very little has been written about the events in Cienfuegos, and most of the evidence has been drawn from secondary sources, such as participants' biographies and memoirs. However recently released documents from the Nixon Presidential Material Project in the National Archives shed light on several issues concerning Cienfuegos that were not common knowledge until now – such as the nature of the interdepartmental meetings during the crisis, and Kissinger's unofficial exchanges with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin. This new information allows us to construct a more sophisticated account of the events surrounding Cienfuegos, while avoiding over-reliance on participants accounts which has been common practice until now.[2]

[2] The Cienfuegos crisis is given only marginal attention in the literature on US foreign policy during the Nixon administration. In addition to the Kissinger memoirs, other notable exceptions include Raymond Garthoff, 'Handling the Cienfuegos Crisis', *International Security*, 8:1 (Summer 1983), pp. 46–66; Ron Hirschbein, *What if They Gave a Crisis and Nobody Came?: Interpreting International Crises* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997); Patrick J. Haney, 'Soccer Fields and Submarines in Cuba: The Politics of Problem Definition', *Naval War College Review*, 50:4 (1997), p. 70. However none of those three studies attempts to explain directly the *making* of US foreign policy during the crisis. Garthoff is concerned more with the broader significance of Cuba in the strategic relations between the superpowers; Hirschbein adopts a hermeneutic approach to explore how interpretations of the world determine foreign policy decisions; and Haney employs the Cienfuegos incident to examine the problem of crisis definition. The Kissinger memoirs remain the only authoritative account of the events, which most subsequent accounts build upon. The memoirs of Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet Ambassador, shed little light on Soviet policies regarding Cienfuegos and the decision-making process in Moscow during that time. See Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (London: Phoenix Press, 1979), pp. 632–52; Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Times Books, 1995), pp. 234–5. See also Nixon, *RN*, pp. 485–90; Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), pp. 250–7; William Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), pp. 191–8. Even Hanhimaki's excellent recent book on Kissinger is remarkably thin in analysing the decision-making process during the Cienfuegos crisis. See Jussi Hanhimaki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 98–100.

Why avoid crisis? The global context

Why did Nixon wish to avoid public confrontation with the Soviets on the matter of Cienfuegos? Evidence suggests a capacity problem in the American foreign policy machine. Policymakers did not wish to, indeed simply could not, deal with another crisis while other crises had not yet been resolved. During such moments of high pressure Kissinger would joke that 'we can't have a crisis this week, my schedule is full'.[3]

While Kissinger's remark should not be taken too literally, recently released documents support the claim that both Nixon and Kissinger were indeed determined to prevent a crisis mood – not only in the minds of the American public, but also in the minds of policymakers. Moreover, their approach suggests a strong conviction that this could be achieved by carefully controlling the systems of foreign policy-making. This particular issue of 'crisis framework' was discussed frequently in NSC meetings throughout the Cienfuegos crisis.

Nixon and Kissinger's well-documented reluctance to delegate tasks and to share information with other agencies was the primary driving force behind the trajectory American foreign policy had taken during the Cienfuegos crisis. This would explain why the 1970 crisis was monitored very closely by the two, with little deliberation within the administration at critical junctions of the crisis.[4] Kissinger's growing influence in the foreign policy machinery at the expense of Secretary of State Rogers was an undisputed fact, even in the early days of the administration.

Only weeks after Nixon's inauguration, John Freeman, the British Ambassador in Washington, had already pointed to the tension in relations between the State Department and the White House. Referring to the US foreign policy machinery, he indicated that:

> as things are, policy is being made by Kissinger rather than the State Department . . . It seems likely therefore that Kissinger's office will acquire some of the responsibilities and prerogatives which probably should belong to the State Department. Thus we may well find most of the ideas in the field of international policy will emanate from the White House and that the job of the State Department will be, not to initiate policy but rather to elaborate and to execute it.[5]

Furthermore, as later British reports suggest, Kissinger's fixation with secrecy and exclusion had detrimental effects not only on relations with other departments, but on the overall process of policymaking as well:

> He has a penchant for secrecy and has been known to turn his own Deputy on the NSC staff out of the room when discussing some point with a foreign representative which he wished to keep to himself. This tends to create unrest among his own staff, and the addition to secrecy has contributed greatly to the poor relations between the NSC, the State Department, the Defence Department, and the CIA . . .

[3] Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 287.

[4] Relations between Kissinger and Secretary of State William Rogers were never cordial, due to conflicting ideas on how to manage American foreign policy. In his memoirs Kissinger admitted that this tension was evident as early as the transition period in 1968: 'Inevitably, Rogers must have considered me an egotistical nitpicker who ruined his relations with the President; I tended to view him as an insensitive neophyte who threatened the careful design of our foreign policy. The relationship was bound to deteriorate.' See Kissinger, *White House Years* (hereafter, *WHY*), p. 31.

[5] Memo, Dean to Greenhill, 5 February 1969. PREM 13/3018, National Archives, London (hereafter, *NA*).

Certain day-to-day problems are held up because he will not allow the inter-agency machinery to go to work on them. The subjects to which he is not giving priority have to wait. . . . Dr. Kissinger's references to the representatives of the State Department, Defence Department etc at Under Secretary level as 'my advisers' do not contribute to a smooth working of the policy machine.[6]

The Cienfuegos episode is a true reflection of the workings of the NSC mechanism under Kissinger and its central role in the making of foreign policy. Accounts such as Freeman's suggest an almost paranoid desire in the minds of Nixon and Kissinger to control major foreign policy issues.

The approach adopted by Nixon and Kissinger during the Cienfuegos crisis is best understood in the light of the global context in which this crisis occurred, and by the state of mind of policymakers during the autumn of 1970. When an American U-2 spy plane photographed facilities of a naval support base for submarines in the Cuban bay of Cienfuegos on 18th September 1970, the machinery of US foreign policy was already over-loaded with international crises. Its resources were stretched to the point where another international crisis would have seriously degraded the quality of decision-making in the White House and the NSC. The *Washington Special Actions Group*, an interdepartmental crisis management group within the NSC, had met thirteen times in fourteen days during September, on the issue of the Jordanian crisis alone.[7]

Nixon's Assistant for National Security Affairs, Henry Kissinger, acknowledged that the 'Autumn of Crises' of 1970 presented the American administration with what he called the 'nightmare of policymakers'; in other words, the spectre of 'simultaneous crises in widely separated parts of the globe.'[8] There were also political reasons for wishing to avoid another high profile crisis. Public criticism had already been directed at Nixon for 'manufacturing' confrontations with the Soviets only to demonstrate his resolve *vis-à-vis* Moscow.[9] Thus when early signs of the impending crisis in Cuba were detected, a concentrated effort was made to avoid a 'crisis mood' in Washington.

September 1970 confronted President Nixon with the most challenging period in foreign policy he had experienced since entering the White House twenty months earlier. The first of two international crises started when American citizens were hijacked into Jordan, where a civil war ensued between King Hussein and Palestinian guerrillas. When Syrian forces (backed by the Soviets) invaded Jordan, a confrontation between the two superpowers looked inevitable for a few days. Meanwhile, the presidential elections in Chile brought to power Salvador Allende and his Socialist Party – the result was perceived by Washington to be a direct threat to its national interest, as the possibility of a second Socialist regime so close to home (along with Cuba) was thought likely to result in a Communist alliance in the Western Hemisphere.

While the Nixon administration was handling the two crises almost simultaneously, it had only just recovered from the impact of the last crisis – the

[6] Memo, Research Department, FCO, 'The US Policy-Making Process under the Nixon Administration', 9 February 1972. FCO 51/262, NA.
[7] Index, 'Washington Special Actions Group Meetings', *Meeting Files (1969–1974)–WSAG Meetings*, NSC Institutional Files, Box H-070, Nixon Presidential Material Project, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter, NPMP, NARA).
[8] Kissinger, *WHY*, p. 639.
[9] Marvin Kalb and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger* (London: Hutchinson, 1974), p. 211.

controversial incursion of American ground troops into Cambodia five months earlier. The expansion of the war in Vietnam into this neutral country led to civil uproar and nationwide demonstrations against America's foreign policy. The tension between the American government and anti-war protestors reached its peak when four students were killed by the National Guard in Ohio State University in May. Suspicions over Nixon's handling of foreign policy were so high following the incursion into Cambodia, that some even questioned whether the stories about the recent events in Cuba were true.[10]

Finally, one cannot underestimate the impact that the continuing war in Vietnam had on the handling of the Cienfuegos crisis. According to Helmut Sonnenfeldt, Kissinger's assistant in the NSC, although the prevailing 'crisis overload' was an important factor, Nixon's primary objective at the time was to get through Vietnam – and unlike his predecessors in the White House, he wanted to use relations with Moscow (as well as Beijing) to that end. However as will be shown later, avoiding a crisis with Moscow over Cuba nevertheless did not mean avoiding sending clear signals to Moscow that its provocative military activities must stop.[11]

Curiously, the crisis opened with low key Soviet-American diplomacy. On 4th August 1970 Yuli Vorontsov, the Soviet *chargé d'affaires* in Washington, came to the White House and delivered a message to Kissinger, stating that Moscow still adhered to the Kennedy-Khrushchev understanding that followed the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. He then asked a baffled Kissinger whether the Americans were doing the same. Vorontsov said there was news about anti-Castro activity by Cuban exiles in the United States, which could be interpreted as a violation of the 1962 understanding. Clearly puzzled by Vorontsov's surprising message, Kissinger said he would check the matter with Nixon.[12] While the motives behind Vorontsov's visit were not completely understood at the time, things became much clearer a few weeks later. In late August an American U-2 spy plane photographed some unusual activity in the port of Cienfuegos, on Cuba's southern coast. The photographs showed the construction of barracks and administrative facilities, as well as recreation facilities, presumably for the use of Soviet personnel.[13]

Then, in early September American intelligence picked up signals from a Soviet flotilla *en route* to Cuba, which included a guided missile destroyer, an ocean-going tug, and two eighty-foot barges which, upon inspection, were found to be used for storage of discharged radioactive waste from nuclear submarine reactors. The Soviet task force reached Cienfuegos on 9th September, and shortly afterwards the Americans began using U-2 flights daily.[14] Subsequent U-2 photos from 16th September clearly showed the construction of military barracks, communication

[10] Nixon was under scrutiny not only at home, but abroad as well. An eight-country survey prepared by the United States Information Agency (USIA) found that the decision to invade Cambodia gained approval only in two countries (The Philippines and Australia), while being disapproved in the remaining six (France, West Germany, United Kingdom, Sweden, Japan, and India). Memo, Loomis to Haig, 'Report on Eight-Country Public Opinion Survey', 8 July 1970, *Cambodian Operations (1970)*, NSC Files, Box 583, NPMP, NARA.

[11] Mr. Sonnenfeldt had commented on an early draft of this article in April 2004.

[12] There were reports about anti-Castro activity in America, coordinated by Cuban exiles. See Kissinger, *WHY*, pp. 632–3; Nixon, *RN*, pp. 485–6.

[13] Kissinger, *WHY*, p. 638.

[14] Ibid., pp. 635, 637; Haney, 'Soccer Fields and Submarines in Cuba', p. 70.

centres, anti aircraft SAM sites, and even recreation facilities.[15] A CIA report concluded that the Soviets were 'establishing a support facility [in Cienfuegos] for naval operations in the Caribbean and the Atlantic' and that 'Soviet naval units, including nuclear powered submarines, may soon be operating regularly out of the Cuban port of Cienfuegos'.[16] This was a clear violation of the 1962 understanding between Kennedy and Khrushchev. As Kissinger explained to Nixon, the understanding – although implicit – was sufficiently thorough and detailed to constitute mutual assurances between the two sides that the US would not intervene in Cuba, in exchange for a Soviet guarantee not to place offensive weapons in Cuba.[17]

Given the unique situation the US had found itself in September 1970, Nixon and Kissinger took a deliberate decision to avoid another crisis. As will be shown in the second section of this article, they decided to maintain a low profile regarding the developments in Cuba. Officials were told to keep the matter low-key. However, in contravention of this guideline, a State Department spokesman mistakenly gave the press a detailed briefing about the situation in Cuba in late September. Nixon's earlier instructions became irrelevant; keeping a low profile was seemingly no longer an option and Kissinger then had to face the press in an attempt to play down the severity of the impending crisis, and to reassure the public that there was nothing critical about the situation in Cienfuegos.[18]

Privately their line was different. Shortly after the press conference Kissinger met with Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet Ambassador in Washington, and warned him that the White House had 'no illusions about this matter . . . We know there is a base in Cuba, and we will view it with the utmost gravity if construction continues and the base remains.'[19] Kissinger then finished the meeting with a virtual ultimatum: America was determined to prevent the construction of a Soviet nuclear submarine base in Cuba; there would be no press briefings on Cienfuegos in the next ten days while Nixon was in Europe. This gave the Soviets a time frame 'to consider whether to go the route of conciliation or the route of confrontation.[20] In his memoirs Dobrynin conceded that his bargaining position was weak and that 'Soviet naval exercises sometimes caused us diplomatic and political problems'. Dobrynin was kept 'completely in the dark' about the Soviet naval manoeuvres, the schedule for which was set by the Supreme Defence Council in Moscow and was considered top secret.[21]

Ten days later, it seemed that Kissinger's subtle brinkmanship had worked. On October 6 Dobrynin returned with a message from the Kremlin, affirming that 'the Soviet Side strictly adheres to its part of the understanding on the Cuban question and will continue to adhere to it in the future'.[22] The following week the two sides exchanged letters regarding definitions and additions to the 1962 understanding. Despite what Nixon described as a few 'save facing delays' the Soviets finally left Cienfuegos and the crisis was over. The construction was halted; the facilities never

[15] H. R. Haldeman with Joseph DiMona, The *Ends of Power* (New York: Times Books, 1978), p. 86.
[16] Kissinger, *WHY*, pp. 638–9.
[17] Robert F. Kennedy, *13 Days: The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962* (London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 187–90; Kissinger, *WHY*, p. 633.
[18] Kissinger, *WHY*, p. 646.
[19] Nixon, *RN*, pp. 487–8.
[20] Kissinger, *WHY*, p. 647.
[21] Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 234–5.
[22] Kissinger, *WHY*, p. 649.

became operational; and Soviet nuclear submarines were never again seen in Cuba. In his memoirs, Kissinger had every reason to be pleased with the outcome of the Cienfuegos crisis:

> Rather than a dramatic confrontation on the order of 1962, we considered that quiet diplomacy was best suited to giving the USSR an opportunity to withdraw without humiliation. By great firmness in the early stages of construction, we avoided a major crisis, yet we achieved our objective.[23]

The successful ending of this near-crisis in Cuba marked the end of a particularly challenging month for the administration. And the balance sheet, according to Nixon, showed a very determined and successful American foreign policy:

> Communist leaders believe in Lenin's precept: Probe with bayonets. If you encounter mush, proceed; if you encounter steel, withdraw . . . While our efforts to prevent Allende from coming to power failed, at least in 1970 in Jordan and in Cuba, their probing had encountered our unmistakable steel.[24]

Nixon's remark demonstrates how the events surrounding the impending crisis in Cienfuegos could not be separated from the global context – the concurrent threats in Jordan and Chile, the ramifications of the Cambodian invasion – all drove the Nixon–Kissinger dyad to maintain a low profile and not to follow the path of escalation and public confrontation that was chosen by President Kennedy in 1962.

How was crisis avoided? The NSC mechanism

How did the administration manage to pursue its policy of 'business as usual' during the Cienfuegos crisis? The answer lies largely in the newly reformed NSC mechanism, and in particular two of its interdepartmental groups.

These bodies were the *Senior Review Group* (SRG) and the *Washington Special Actions Group* (WSAG). By diverting the responsibilities for managing the crisis from the crisis management group (WSAG) to the most senior group in the NSC (the Senior Review Group), the Nixon-Kissinger dyad was enable to achieve a higher level of secrecy, while projecting the mood that there was no crisis going on over Cienfuegos.

Although in his memoirs Kissinger refers to interdepartmental meetings during the crisis as 'WSAG meetings', recently released documents reveal that those meetings were actually convened by the SRG. Subsequently, later accounts of the events in Cienfuegos – most notably those by Garthoff, Hirschbein and Haney – also refer to WSAG as the crisis management group during the crisis, as they mostly rely on Kissinger's detailed memoirs. Whether this is due to Kissinger's selective memory or not, the implication is that important parts of the story of Cienfuegos now have to be retold in light of the new information. Furthermore, as American allies often suggested, Kissinger had a tendency to 'highlight' his role in the sequence of events. The British Ambassador in Washington during the crisis, John Freeman, noted at the end of the crisis that:

[23] Ibid., p. 651.
[24] Nixon, *RN*, p. 490.

(a) Nothing would lead me to prefer Kissinger's evidently rather garbled account of what was happening in and around Cienfuegos to the information which is now reaching us from more orthodox channels. In every case concerning what took place in Cuba, where there is a discrepancy between the reports we are now getting and what Kissinger told me, I have no hesitation in accepting the [Central Intelligence] Agency account.[25]
(b) On the other hand I should be equally confident in accepting as authentic (if perhaps slightly over-coloured) Kissinger's account of the White House assessment of the threat and the diplomacy with which they reacted to it.[26]

Following the entrance of Richard Nixon into the White House in January 1969, the NSC underwent a thoroughgoing reorganisation led by Kissinger in his role as Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.[27] The structure of decision-making in the new NSC system followed very closely the lines of the *formalistic model* of presidential management as later outlined by Richard T. Johnson and Alexander George.[28] Amongst the main characteristics of the formalistic model which were evident in the new NSC system under Kissinger were the emphasis of hierarchy in screening information; the discouragement of bargaining and conflict within the advisory group; the fact that the president rarely reached down for information; and orderly policymaking with well-defined procedures. The flow of information and advice was generated at the bottom, in various inter-agency groups and *ad hoc* committees, each designated with specific area or issue tasks. The process was clearly defined and tightly structured, where departments reported to department heads, which reported to Kissinger, who then alone reported to Nixon.

Nevertheless concerns about the new system were raised even before Nixon entered the White House. Designated-Secretary of Defence Melvin Laird expressed his worries to Kissinger that the new system would

. . . institute 'a closed loop' in which all intelligence inputs would be channelled through a single source . . . such an arrangement in effect would or could isolate not only the President from direct access to intelligence community outputs but also the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and other top-level members of the President's team.[29]

The Senior Review Group was placed above the WSAG and other interagency groups.[30] Its role was to act at the key nexus between the NSC and the various groups below it, and its responsibilities included ordering policy papers from the different NSC interagency groups, reviewing them before submission to the consideration of the NSC discussion forum, and coordinating the works of the various interdepartmental groups. The group's core membership included the senior State and Defense

[25] It is likely that the agency to which the Ambassador was referring was the CIA. In a related memo Ambassador Freeman highlighted the fact that Kissinger's assumptions regarding the Soviet threat were undermined by a 'CIA official'. Memo, Freeman to Greenhill, 'Soviet Activities in Cuba', 3 December 1970: PREM15/721, NA.
[26] Memo, Freeman to Greenhill, 20 November 1970: PREM15/721, NA.
[27] Kissinger's main partner in restructuring the NSC was General Andrew Goodpaster, who acted as transition-adviser to president-elect Nixon, after serving as Staff Secretary to President Eisenhower.
[28] Richard T. Johnson, *Managing the White House: An Intimate Study of the Presidency* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980). This generic model (along with the competitive and collegial models) attempts to capture the nature of interaction between the President and his group of advisers in times of crisis.
[29] Laird to Kissinger, 'Your Memorandum Dated January 3 1969 Concerning a New NSC System', January 9 1969, *HAK Administrative and Staff Files*, Box 1, HAK Office Files, NPMP, NARA.
[30] Amongst them were the Verification Panel (to deal with strategic arms talks); the Vietnam Special Studies Group; and the Defense Program Review Committee.

Departments officials below the Secretary-level; the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Other officials would participate when appropriate.[31] Like the other interdepartmental groups, it was chaired by Kissinger. William Quandt, a former NSC staff member, suggested that apart from controlling the agenda and the flow of information, Kissinger's chairmanship of the various interdepartmental meetings also served as a tool to influence the attitudes of the bureaucracy along the lines of his realist, competitive worldview:

> [Kissinger] thought that through the process of having these endless meetings and engaging people – he was dominating every meeting he was in – he would end up shaping their worldview. They began to see the world as he and Nixon did; a strategic, cold war prison. So partly the meetings were to premature that his and Nixon's world view was given the stamp of approval . . . and people did begin to say phrases and see things in this way.[32]

The WSAG was formally created in July 1969, following a presidential directive that 'henceforth political-military contingency plans prepared by NSC Interdepartmental Groups . . . shall be forwarded to the NSC Washington Special Actions Group.'[33] Since its formation the WSAG has convened whenever an international event had threatened to escalate into a full crisis. In the fifteen months between its foundation and the events in Cienfuegos, the WSAG met no less than forty eight times, monitoring developments in Korea, Cambodia, the Middle East, as well as Sino-Soviet relations. Some of these events had indeed developed into international crises, such as the incursion of American troops into Cambodia in April 1970 and the Jordanian crisis five months later.

Given the warning signs coming from Cuba, it would be natural to assume that the tasks of monitoring developments and preparing contingencies would be placed in the hands of the WSAG, as has been the case in such circumstances ever since July 1969. However recently declassified documents show that the WSAG only met once on the issue of Cienfuegos, on 13th October. Significantly, this meeting occurred after the crisis was resolved.

The responsibilities of coordinating and managing the crisis were taken away from the WSAG, and were placed under the Senior Review Group. The decision-making process was relocated away from the crisis management group – a signal to all parties concerned that the administration did not want the events in Cienfuegos to be interpreted as a developing a crisis. Importantly, the Senior Review Group had less operational functions and less supporting staff. This ensured higher degree of secrecy.

The perceived importance of this institutional signalling is clear when one examines the membership list of each group. Bizarrely, they are practically identical. Both groups were chaired by Kissinger, and the senior members in each group, namely the representatives of State, Defense, the CIA, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had not changed: U. Alexis Johnson, David Packard, Richard Helms, and Admiral

[31] The SRG was created in September 1970, and was a new version of the Review Group, which was established in January 1969. From: 'NSC Support Organization Index', pp. 23–4 September 1970 (folder: NSC Organization), *Misc. Files of the Nixon Administration-NSC System*, NSC Institutional Files, Box H-300, NPMP, NARA.

[32] William B. Quandt, interview, 26 August 2004, Charlottesville, VA.

[33] NSDM-19, Kissinger to the Secretary of State et al., 'Washington Special Actions Group', 3 July 1969 (folder: #7, '7/11/69 Korea'), *Meeting Files (1969–1974)–WSAG Meetings*, NSC Institutional Files, Box H-070, NPMP, NARA.

Thomas Moorer, respectively.[34] These are the people who participated in a SRG meeting on 19th September.[35] These are also the same people who participated in most WSAG meetings during the Cambodian crisis in the spring of 1970, or during the Jordanian crisis that was being managed simultaneously with the Cienfuegos crisis. It was not bureaucratic bickering or conflict among the advisory group that underpinned Nixon's decision to shift responsibilities to the Senior Review Group; nor was his decision influenced by the fact that the WSAG was already extremely busy with managing the Jordanian crisis – since the same individuals also had to deal with the crisis in Cienfuegos.

The Administration achieved a policy of 'business as usual'. The Nixon-Kissinger dyad managed to achieve two policy objectives: first, as the Senior Review Group was positioned at the top of the NSC pyramid, it guaranteed tighter control over the flow of information, which naturally enabled the White House to maintain the highest level of secrecy. Indeed the full sequence of events was known only to Nixon and Kissinger.[36] Second, since during this period the NSC's crisis management group (WSAG) was not used, it implied *ipso facto* that there was no international crisis going on in Cuba, at least not publicly.

This argument is also supported by the accounts of NSC members. Winston Lord, special assistant to Kissinger on China policy between 1970 and 1973, observed in 1998 that Kissinger was very concerned about who was chairing the various NSC committees, and having his people determine the agenda. However while the Senior Review Group was considered to be at the top of the NSC pyramid, Lord admitted that 'WSAG got more and more important as time went on. Other [committees] got less important.'[37] It is not unlikely that WSAG's growing importance within the NSC also prompted Kissinger to reassign its crisis management responsibilities to another group, where it would be easier to keep a low profile.

The first Senior Review Group (SRG) meeting was held on 19 September and four days later a restricted NSC meeting was held concerning both Jordan and Cuba. The following day, 24th September, a second SRG meeting took place. Three days later Nixon went on a ten-day trip to Europe, accompanied by Kissinger, as well as Secretary of State Rogers and Secretary of Defense Laird. The visit included meetings with the leaders of Italy, Yugoslavia, Spain, the UK and Ireland, as well as a visit to the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, and a meeting with senior NATO officials in Naples.[38] Nixon's trip precluded any speculations within the administration about Cienfuegos, and gave the Soviets a much-needed break to contemplate their next

[34] Incidentally, the membership was the same as in two additional NSC subcommittees, the Under Secretaries Committee, and the Vietnam Special Studies Group (VSSG).

[35] NSC staff Viron Vaky also took part in the meeting.

[36] On 22 October Kissinger met with British Ambassador John Freeman and told him the sequence of events. He mentioned several times the fact that this was a sensitive issue as no one but the President and himself knew all the facts. Freeman noted that 'Kissinger showed some embarrassment', and explained that he did not like to keep secrets from London 'unless it was absolutely necessary'. Memo, Freeman to Douglas-Home, 'Soviet Activities in Cuba', 29 October 1970: PREM15/721, NA.

[37] 'Oral History Roundtable: The Nixon Administration National Security Council', 8 December 1998. This roundtable was part of the National Security Council Project, organised by the Center for International and Security Studies, University of Maryland, and the Brookings Institution, Washington, DC: ⟨http://www.brookings.edu/fp/research/projects/nsc/transcripts/19981208.pdf⟩ (date accessed 22 April 2004).

[38] Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., *On Watch: A Memoir* (Arlington, VA: Zumwalt & Consultants, 1976), p. 301.

moves. By the second week of October the crisis was practically over, and a last meeting, this time in a restricted SRG/WSAG forum, was held on 13th October.

Initial evaluations of the situation in Cienfuegos started in mid-September. Following the intelligence reports about the Soviet build-up and the flotilla heading towards Cuba, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, Chief of Naval Operations, warned Admiral Moorer and Secretary of Defense Laird on 17th September that the Soviet effort must be challenged. A few days later Zumwalt had found out from Rear Admiral Rembrandt Robinson, the liaison officer between the Joint Chiefs and the White House, that his memo had not been circulated to Moorer and Laird, nor to Secretary of State Rogers. The reason, he was told by Robinson, was because 'Kissinger did not want this done because he did not want any policy discussion on this matter . . . Henry did not like to bring Secretary Rogers into foreign policy matters that were delicate.'[39]

Instead, on 19th September Kissinger convened the Senior Review Group for a first meeting on the issue of 'Cuba/USSR – Military Activity in Cienfuegos'. Taking part at the meeting in the White House Situation room, were U. Alexis Johnson (State); David Packard (Defense); Richard Helms (CIA); Admiral Moorer (Joint Chiefs); and Viron Vaky, a NSC staff member. The minutes of this meeting depict an atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty regarding the nature of the threat and how it should be dealt with. Kissinger gave them clear directions, that

> the Cuban/Soviet Base problem [is] to be discussed only in this very restricted group . . . The President and Secretary Rogers want to keep it very restricted. They want to avoid a crisis mood until we know what we are going to do. Therefore, each principal is to keep the circle that knows about this very small and paperwork very restricted.[40]

One of the main issues to be raised at the meeting concerned the 'legality' of the Soviet actions with reference to the 1962 Kennedy-Khrushchev understanding. Kissinger suggested that 'the Soviets could operate in a ''legal'' way that would make it very difficult for us to meet';[41] Admiral Moorer suggested, however that the Soviets' actions might be considered a violation of the 1962 agreement. Kissinger concluded that the Russians 'probably do not' violate an international understanding. Secondly, Kissinger asked, how should Washington react to this challenge? The group agreed that the strategic situation at the time was different from that of 1962 – moreover, some members (Packard and Johnson) suggested that the Soviet challenge did not change the balance between the superpowers very much, and that unlike 1962, the situation did not constitute a major change in the strategic balance. Admiral Moorer, on the other hand, argued that 'it may be just the beginning, and they might want to put up facilities in Chile.'[42]

The meeting ended with one last reference to the issue of secrecy. Packard suggested that the only reason for quick process of decision-making was that the story was likely to leak within a matter of days. The group was aware of the danger that Congress might 'build up' a crisis, and Helms pointed out that 'the jumpiest people in the world about Cuba are in the Congress.' It was agreed therefore that in

[39] Ibid., p. 311.
[40] Minutes of SRG Meeting, 'CUBA/USSR – Military Activity in Cienfuegos', 19 September 1970 (folder: #8, 'Chronology of Cuban Submarine Base Episode 1970–1971', 1 of 2), *Country Files–Latin America*, HAK Office Files, NSC Files, Box 128, NPMP, NARA.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

the case of press leaks, the principals would simply 'stone-wall' and make no further comment.[43]

There was no discussion on concrete policies during the first meeting. Nevertheless, the summary of decisions suggests that emphasis was put on 'in-house functions', delegating as little as possible to agencies outside the senior group. Firstly, it was decided that Admiral Moorer would prepare a paper on the strategic significance of the Soviet activity in Cienfuegos; second, that Llewellyn Thompson (former Ambassador to Moscow) would present to the group the Soviet perception of the situation.[44] Finally, the group agreed that at this early stage any discussion of possible responses should be deferred, to give the principles time to consider the issue.

Possible responses were submitted to Kissinger a few days later. While no one disputed the facts, opinions on how to handle the situation varied considerably. The State Department, mostly based on the assessment of Llewellyn Thompson, suggested that the Soviets were militarily and technologically lagging behind Washington, and that the construction of the naval base in Cuba was merely an emulation of similar actions America had taken fifteen years earlier; the proposed solution was therefore a quiet meeting between Rogers and his Soviet counterpart Gromyko to dissolve the impending crisis. Predictably perhaps, the assessment of the Pentagon was much bleaker. The Defense Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff considered the submarine base in Cienfuegos 'a strategic threat to the United States', and called for the removal of the base (although without specifying how this should be done) and the call-up of reserves to demonstrate American resolution. Kissinger believed both courses of actions to be impractical.[45]

During a restricted NSC meeting on 23rd September Nixon again urged the group to resolve the looming crisis by maintaining a low profile, and through quiet, yet forceful diplomacy. He accepted Rogers' view that it was important to guard against 'high-level tension', and not to 'create a crisis in the public mind'.[46] Still, Nixon instructed his advisers to work out contingency plans for the mining of Cienfuegos, the blockade of Cuba, and the tailing of Soviet ships; Nixon was due to leave for Europe in four days, and he could not see how he could leave the country whilst in the middle of a crisis in Cuba; he reiterated the importance of keeping a low public profile.[47]

The issue of heightened secrecy was raised again the following day by NSC staff member Richard Kennedy, reiterating the policy first outlined by Kissinger in the early days of the crisis:

> We want to avoid a situation in which a 'crisis' atmosphere develops which would either prompt a proposal for the return of the President [from his European trip] – which would add emphasis and heat to the situation – or a charge that the President didn't know what was going on or did not view it with concern.[48]

[43] Ibid.

[44] Thompson was considered an expert on Soviet politics. He had served twice as an Ambassador in Moscow, and was also Deputy Under Secretary of State during the Johnson Administration, and later took part in the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks with Moscow in the 1970s.

[45] Kissinger, *WHY*, pp. 640–1.

[46] Ibid., p. 639; Isaacson, *Kissinger*, p. 296.

[47] Rogers also suggested keeping a low profile until after the mid-term elections in November. See Nixon, *RN*, p. 487; Kissinger, *WHY*, p. 643.

[48] Memo, Kennedy to Kissinger, 'Cuba Planning Meeting', 24 September 1970 (folder: #8, 'Chronology of Cuban Submarine Base Episode 1970–1971', 1 of 2), *Country Files–Latin America*, HAK Office Files, NSC Files, Box 128, NPMP, NARA.

During a meeting on 24th September the group mainly discussed contingencies in the event that information concerning Cienfuegos became known publicly while the president was away on his European tour. Kissinger alerted the participants that since so many analysts were now aware of developments, there were two possible dangers: '(1) it might be built into a Cuban missile crisis, and (2) on the other hand, if we keep it too low-key, then the congress might build it up'.[49] He then suggested that they needed to 'find a happy that would keep the public calm and quiet and at the same time stir up the Soviets enough to get them to close down the base'.[50]

The next day, 25th September, proved to be a crucial turning point in the management of the crisis. According to Kissinger, following a bureaucratic blunder, when he returned to his office that day after a meeting with the Soviet Ambassador, 'chaos had erupted'. The news was suddenly out and press reports were filled with alarming stories about the recent developments in Cienfuegos, and as far as Kissinger was concerned, there was a real danger of things getting out of control.[51]

Remarkably, the reason for this dramatic development was a press briefing by the Pentagon's spokesman, Jerry Friedheim. As Kissinger noted in his memoirs, 'a Washington classic of misunderstood instructions' meant that despite the carefully planned press guidance that has been prepared by the Senior Review Group the previous day, Friedman ended up giving the press a full account of Soviet actions in Cienfuegos in the preceding months.[52] Amongst other information provided at the briefing, Friedheim was quoted saying that Soviet ships had brought equipment to Cienfuegos which 'makes us feel they may be seeking sustained submarine capabilities in the area'.[53] Friedheim also explained how the information was obtained and that the administration knew about the activity in Cienfuegos, but made it clear that it was not certain yet if there was a base there.

This incident is compelling given the importance Nixon and Kissinger placed on downgrading the significance of the events in Cienfuegos. Despite the highly hierarchical organisation and the well-defined procedures to screen information, it seemed that the President's message did not get to Jerry Friedheim.

Immediately after the briefing Kissinger rang Defense Secretary Laird and his deputy, David Packard. The three tried to understand what had happened at the briefing and more importantly, they discussed what to do next. Kissinger already had some concerns about leaks. He suspected that they came 'from one section of the intelligence community, who were also opposed to taking a tough line throughout the crisis'.[54] Apparently miscommunication between Friedheim and Kissinger's liaison officer with the White House Press Office had led Friedheim to provide the press with

[49] Memo for the Record, 'Meeting of SRG on Cuba', 24 September 1970 (folder: #5, 'Cuba, Items to Discuss with the President'), *Country Files–Latin America*, HAK Office Files, NSC Files, Box 128, NPMP, NARA. At the meeting Secretary Laird alerted that a low-key posture wouldn't work and that the story would leak, however neither Laird nor Kissinger explained how they found out about possible leaks. See Kissinger, *WHY*, p. 643.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Kissinger, *WHY*, pp. 644–5.

[52] Ibid., p. 645.

[53] Bulletin, Associated Press, 'Soviet Subs', 25 September 1970 (folder: #8, 'Chronology of Cuban Submarine Base Episode 1970–1971', 1 of 2), *Country Files–Latin America*, HAK Office Files, NSC Files, Box 128, NPMP, NARA.

[54] Memo, Freeman to Douglas-Home, 29 October 1970: PREM 15/721, NA.

information beyond the basic guidelines he was supposed to discuss.[55] Laird suggested that the White House should blame the Defense Department for the misunderstanding, and Kissinger replied, 'That's not a problem. We blame you for everything that goes wrong anyway; that's automatic. But what do we do from here; all hell is going to break loose.'[56]

The most imminent problem was Nixon's European trip in two days time. Kissinger was already scheduled to brief the press that day about the President's trip, and he decided to use the occasion to put things right. He reassured the press that there was no crisis in Cuba, and that the timing of the European trip was not problematic. Furthermore, Kissinger used the opportunity to warn the Soviets against the build-up in Cienfuegos:

> With respect to the Soviet naval activity in the Caribbean, we are, of course, watching the development of Soviet naval activity and the possible construction there. We are watching it very closely. The Soviet Union can be under no doubt that we would view the establishment of a strategic base in the Caribbean with the utmost seriousness. . . . We are watching the events in Cuba. We are not at this moment in a position to say exactly what they mean. We will continue to observe them and at the right moment we will take the action that seems indicated. We are in excellent communication. Nothing very rapid and dramatic is likely to occur, and we are going to be in very close touch with the situation.[57]

Peculiarly, however, there was little reaction in the press to the story, largely because Kissinger's warnings seemed to be implausible. Following the events of the day, *The New York Times* reported: 'In Washington, United States officials, including members of the intelligence community, have expressed puzzlement over the news, noting that these have been based on dubious and dated information'.[58] Two days later, in an interview to ABC, Senator Fulbright, the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, also questioned the reliability of the story, pointing to the fact 'nearly every year just before we have an appropriation bill in the Senate we get these stories, so it may or may not be true. I read the story in the paper. It isn't conclusive at all. They suspect something is going on at that base.' Fulbright even regarded the basic assumption that the Soviets have no right to be in Cuba, a 'very questionable proposition.'[59]

Given his endless efforts to maintain a low profile, Kissinger was indeed lucky that the press refused to buy his story about the Soviet build-up. Few days after Kissinger's press conference, the British Ambassador noted in surprise that 'Public reaction so far has been less than might have been expected given the emotions usually aroused by the subject of Cuba . . .'[60] Moreover, this story is even more

[55] Incidentally, Friedheim told Defense Secretary Laird that he received the facts from the liaison officer, Robert Houdek. However according to Kissinger, Houdek – who was a NSC staff member in Kissinger's office – did not know all the facts. In the various conversations between Kissinger and Laird, Rogers, and Packard, it was not clear who was responsible for this 'misunderstanding'. Telcon, Kissinger and Packard, 25 September 1970 (folder: #8, 'Chronology of Cuban Submarine Base Episode 1970–1971' 1 of 2), *Country Files–Latin America*, HAK Office Files, NSC Files, Box 128, NPMP, NARA.

[56] Telcon, Kissinger and Laird, 25 September 1970, ibid.

[57] Background Briefing by Kissinger, 'Soviet Presence in Cuba', 25 September 1970 (folder: #2, 'Cuba-HAK'), *Country Files–Latin America*, HAK Office Files, NSC Files, Box 128, NPMP, NARA.

[58] Cited in Richard Reeves, *President Nixon: Alone in the White House* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), p. 257.

[59] *ABC's Issues and Answers*, 27 September 1970.

[60] Memo, Freeman to FCO, 29 September 1970: FCO 7/1614, NA.

amazing when one discovers that following the Pentagon briefing, Kissinger had leaked to the press that 'Soviet missile submarines in Cuba would be offensive in nature and this would bring into play the Kennedy policy for the Caribbean'.[61]

Kissinger's approach to handling the crisis is truly puzzling. Almost simultaneously, he called for a high level of secrecy, while leaking the story out to the press. If the build-up in Cienfuegos indeed presented a real threat to US interests, why would he wish to keep it a secret? However, if this was not the case, what was Kissinger thinking when he decided to leak the story to the press and to build up a crisis out of nothing? To this effect the British Embassy in Moscow concluded at the end of the crisis that there were

> still more questions than answers about the whole affair. It is difficult to judge whether Kissinger's remarks were based on the assumption that any sign of new Soviet activities in Cuba must be immediately and firmly opposed, or whether there was more evidence available which justified the strong line which he took. Taking the first assumption, it would appear possible . . . that in this case he thought something fishy was going on, and that the best chance of stopping it was by deliberate publicity and creation of a state of public anxiety. If the second assumption is correct, it is hard to see why Kissinger was so secretive and wished to prevent any further discussion with British officials.[62]

Not only did Kissinger prevent intelligence-sharing with the British, he also refused to cooperate with the US Congress. Whereas CIA Director Helms was willing to show the House Armed Service Committee overland reconnaissance photographs of the Soviet base, Kissinger 'put his foot down, saying he did not want anything on this subject shared with Congress'. In return, the Committee's Chairman, Mendel Rivers, told Kissinger that 'he would brook no further interference with his committee's right to see intelligence'.[63]

A few hours after his press briefing Kissinger met with Ambassador Dobrynin, whose face was 'ashen', according to Kissinger. The two firstly discussed the prospect of a Summit between the superpowers to be held in Moscow in the following year, but as Kissinger noted after the meeting, 'he [Dobrynin] clearly had his mind on the Cuban problem'.[64] The purpose of his statement earlier that day, Kissinger explained, was to give the Soviets the opportunity to withdraw without public confrontation. Washington knew that there was indeed a submarine base in Cienfuegos, and was determined that it would not remain there. He then suggested that if the Soviet ships left Cuba, the administration would consider the whole story as no more than a training exercise and there would be no public comment on the matter – otherwise, Kissinger warned, he would not hesitate from taking public steps (although he did not specify what they might be). Dobrynin promised to deliver the message to the Kremlin.[65]

The following day Kissinger took further steps to ensure that no public comment would be made on the issue of Cienfuegos while he was in Europe accompanying

[61] The policy suggests that peace in the Western Hemisphere could be preserved if the Soviet would not introduce offensive weapons. Memo, Freeman to FCO, 26 September 1970: FCO 7/1614, NA.
[62] Memo, British Embassy to FCO, 'Cienfuegos', 13 November 1970: FCO 7/1615, NA.
[63] Center for the Study of Intelligence, *How Intelligence-Sharing with Congress Has Evolved.* ⟨http://www.cia.gov/csi/monograph/lawmaker/1.htm⟩ (date accessed 22 March 2005).
[64] Memo of Conversation, Kissinger and Dobrynin, 25 September 1970 (folder: #8, 'Chronology of Cuban Submarine Base Episode 1970–1971', 1 of 2), *Country Files–Latin America*, HAK Office Files, NSC Files, Box 128, NPMP, NARA.
[65] Ibid.

Nixon. The fact that Secretaries Laird and Rogers (who were not aware of Kissinger's ultimatum to Dobrynin) were also with Nixon on his ten-day trip was undoubtedly helpful in maintaining a 'coherent press policy', as Kissinger noted in his memoirs.[66] In a memo to the Secretaries of State and Defense, the Director of the CIA, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Kissinger stated that:

> The President has directed that no comment, speculation or backgrounding of any kind be undertaken by U.S. spokesmen or officials and that future inquiries on the subject of a possible submarine base in Cuba be responded to with the following line: 'I have nothing to add to what has already been said on this subject'.[67]

While Nixon and his top advisers were in Europe, no progress had been made towards the resolution of the crisis, largely because Kissinger thought Dobrynin needed the time to convey the situation to Moscow and reconsider the Soviet position. Nevertheless Kissinger asked his deputy, Alexander Haig, to reiterate his message to Dobrynin. In fact Haig's message to Dobrynin ('Either you . . . dismantle the base . . . or we will do it for you') was much more threatening than Kissinger's initial warning – so much so that Kissinger feared the Kremlin's reaction.[68]

Dobrynin returned to Kissinger with a positive message from the Kremlin on 6th October, reaffirming that there was no buildup in Cienfuegos and that Moscow still adhered to the 1962 understanding. Dobrynin added that he could not guarantee that no Soviet ships would ever visit Cuba, but he would agree that if they did so it would not be in an operational capacity. Before the meeting concluded it was agreed that the two governments would reach an understanding about the meaning of the word 'base', to prevent future confrontations over semantics.[69]

The same low key approach prevailed when the two met again three days later and exchanged working definitions. It was agreed that naval vessels would be added to the 1962 understanding. Although a few Soviet ships visited Cuban ports in the ensuing months, the Cienfuegos crisis was over. On 13th October a restricted SRG/WSAG met for the last time on the issue of Cienfuegos. Again, Kissinger reiterated that '. . . the President feels we should play it in as low-key a way as possible. There should be no stories that we forced them to back down.' Even at that late stage Kissinger felt that information about the crisis and its resolution should be kept secret – especially his off-the-record discussions with Dobrynin: 'We would let out the lowest possible level in the Pentagon the facts that they left. We are not going to announce anything from the White House. The information on the exchanges with Dobrynin is absolutely to be kept in this group.'[70]

[66] Kissinger, *WHY*, p. 647.

[67] Memo, Kissinger to the Secretary of State et al., 'Public Comment on Possible Submarine Base in Cuba', 26 September 1970 (folder: #4, 'Cuba [2]'), *Country File–Latin America*, HAK Office Files, NSC Files, Box 128, NPMP, NARA.

[68] Alexander Haig with Charles McCarry, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World, A Memoir* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), pp. 254–5.

[69] Memo of Conversation, Kissinger and Dobrynin, 6 October 1970 (folder: #2, 'Cuba-HAK'), *Country Files–Latin America*, HAK Office Files, NSC Files, Box 128, NPMP, NARA.

[70] Memo of Conversation, 'Restricted SRG/WSAG on Cienfuegos', 13 October 1970 (folder: #1, 'WSAG Minutes (Originals) 1969 and 1970', 1 of 6), *Minutes of Meetings (1969–1974)-WSAG*, NSC Institutional Files, Box H-114, NPMP, NARA. Along with Kissinger who chaired the meeting, the participants included Secretary Laird (Defence); U. Alexis Johnson (State); Thomas Karamessines (CIA); Colonel Robert Pursley (Military Assistant to Secretary Laird); Admiral Freedman (Deputy Director, Joint Chiefs of Staff); and Richard Kennedy (NSC Staff).

The Kissinger-Dobrynin exchanges

The low-key, 'unofficial' exchanges between Kissinger and Dobrynin were designed to ensure that there would be no further leaks or misunderstandings on how to deal with the press. This new pattern of policymaking outside the formal NSC system was not uncommon during the Nixon-Kissinger years, especially with regard to the most urgent policy areas, namely Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union. Winston Lord observed in 1998 that these three issues 'were very urgent and lent themselves to control and secrecy, [and] were dominated by transactions outside the system, and by Kissinger's personal role with his staff'.[71] Helmut Sonnenfeldt, another member of Kissinger's NSC staff, observed that:

> The orderliness of the process was there in certain respects but not in others, and it doesn't mean that it was disorderly, it just meant that it was not in the formal manner in which the meeting structure operated. A lot of things were settled in conversations between people . . . A lot of decisions were made that were not the product of formal process. They may fit into the theory and the thrust of the formal process, but they were made in terms of the necessities and requirements of the moment.[72]

This outside-the-system informal, secretive policy making now became Kissinger's new strategy to reach a quick and quiet resolution to the crisis. Following Nixon's return from Europe, Ambassador Dobrynin was expected to declare his government's position on the issue of the naval base in Cienfuegos. With that in mind, on 5th October Kissinger received a memo from his assistant, Alexander Haig, 'reminding' him that nobody knew about his discussions with Dobrynin, and that Kissinger should act to eliminate possible frictions with Secretary Rogers, given the lukewarm relations between the two:

> It is essential . . . that you keep clearly in mind that no one is aware of your discussions with Dobrynin and that all parties are wrestling with the obvious requirement to communicate at the first opportunity with the Soviets. In view of this you should play the game straight-faced but take the first opportunity to have the President tell Rogers that in view of the implications of the communication with the Soviets that he prefers to have you convey the message and that he wants this to be done immediately. He might make the point that this is the kind of communication best left to you as to avoid compromising Rogers' position on more fundamental issues.[73]

Furthermore, Haig also suggested refraining from further interdepartmental deliberations, especially since the Kissinger–Dobrynin exchanges seemed to be highly effective in moving the crisis towards its resolution:

> In my view it would be well to do this as soon as possible so as to preclude the kind of sterile deliberations that will result from the misapprehensions currently harboured by the Senior [Review] Group. Furthermore, it is obvious that the nature of our contact will become a major cause celebre if it is not dealt with promptly.[74]

This account is supported by the British Ambassador, who believed that the full account of the Kissinger-Dobrynin exchanges was still a secret two weeks after the

[71] 'Oral History Roundtable: The Nixon Administration National Security Council'.
[72] Helmut Sonnenfeldt, interview, 13 August 2004, The Brookings Institution, Washington DC.
[73] Memo, Haig to Kissinger, 5 October 1970 (folder: #9, 'Chronology of Cuban Submarine Base Episode 1970–1971', 2 of 2), *Country Files–Latin America*, HAK Office Files, NSC Files, Box 128, NPMP, NARA.
[74] Ibid.

resolution of the crisis, suggesting that 'decisions were taken and implemented in the White House were not fully divulged (and probably have not been even now) to the Secretaries of State and Defence.'[75]

In many ways Haig's memo epitomises US policy during the Cienfuegos crisis. When early signs of crisis were visible on 18th September a policy of 'business as usual' and heightened secrecy was launched; when a bureaucratic blunder a week later threatened to create the much-feared crisis mood in the minds of the public and the media, Nixon and Kissinger decided to go a step further by opening a back channel to Dobrynin, far from the eyes of the media, or indeed anyone else in the administration. With hindsight, this policy proved successful. Kissinger's firm warnings delivered in his meetings with Dobrynin proved more effective than the inter-departmental meetings in bringing the Cienfuegos crisis to an anticlimactic resolution.

Conclusion: Crisis management of a non-crisis?

Was the sequence of events in Cienfuegos tantamount to a crisis? Traditional studies of international crises usually stem from two broad approaches: *systemic* and *decision-making*. The first sees crisis as an objective phenomenon in international politics, resulting from the interaction *between* nation-states.[76] The latter focuses on the role of decision-makers *within* the state – here the crisis is born in the minds of policymakers who may define a situation as crisis based on their subjective perceptions.[77]

Perhaps the most significant study of Cienfuegos to date is Patrick J. Haney's work on the politics of problem definition.[78] In this article Haney employs Cienfuegos as a case study to examine how events come to be defined as crises, or non-crises, and how policy makers benefit from this categorisation. Crises, Haney explains, are socially and politically constructed in the minds of decision-makers, who may differ on how they perceive the situation, and therefore on ways to resolve it. In Haney's eyes, Cienfuegos was not a crisis, even though it had all the makings of a major crisis. However given the evidence presented in this article, it is clear that the events surrounding Cienfuegos were indeed tantamount to a crisis.

[75] Memo, Freeman to Greenhill, 'The White House and the State Department', 28 October 1970: PREM 15/2231, NA.

[76] See, for example, Charles A. McClelland, 'The Beginning, Duration, and Abatement of International Crises: Comparisons in Two Conflict Arenas', in C. F. Hermann (ed.), *International Crises: Insights from Behavioral Research* (New York: Free Press, 1972), pp. 83–105; Oran Young, *The Intermediaries: Third Parties in International Crisis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967); Glenn H. Snyder and Paul Diesing (eds.) *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

[77] See, for example, Charles F. Hermann, *Crises in Foreign Policy* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs, Merrill, 1969), and 'International Crisis as a Situational Variable', in James N. Rosenau (ed.), *International Politics and Foreign Policy: A Reader in Research and Theory* (New York: The Free Press, 1969), pp. 409–21; Michael Brecher (ed.), *Studies in Crisis Behavior* (New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1978); and Patrick J. Haney, *Organizing for Foreign Policy Crises: Presidents, Advisers and the Management of Decision Making* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 10–11.

[78] Haney, 'Soccer Fields and Submarines', pp. 67–84.

Following the decision-making approach, and equipped with the newly released archival material, this article suggests that Cienfuegos was indeed an international crisis since American decision-makers perceived it as such, even though – and perhaps *because* – they were so determined to downgrade its significance.

At first glance the circumstantial evidence suggests that Cienfuegos was *not* a crisis: the traditional crisis management group was replaced by another group within the NSC during the crisis – implying that the situation was not perceived as critical enough to convene the WSAG. There were also no public confrontations or dramatic exercises in brinkmanship between the superpowers – elements that would help to project a sense of crisis in the minds of the public. Even the press leak failed to alarm the public, and only led the media to question whether Nixon was manufacturing crises. It is also well established that Nixon did not want a crisis in Cuba, particularly given the global situation the US found itself in the autumn of 1970.

Nevertheless, it is now clear that these procedural issues could not conceal one fundamental premise – for American policymakers Cienfuegos *was* a crisis. Perhaps the implications for the strategic balance with the Soviet Union were less dramatic than during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, but the consensus amongst decision-makers was that the challenge could not be ignored – a remarkable decision given that the Soviet motivations behind the buildup in Cienfuegos were largely unclear.[79]

During the crisis Kissinger had suggested several explanations for the Soviet activity in Cuba: impressing Latin America; establishing a presence to be later bargained in the context of SALT; a deliberate move to bring about a confrontation; or a move towards Soviet expansionism. Kissinger believed the latter to be the right explanation – 'a calculated but highly significant political challenge', part of a process in which the Soviets have been 'testing us for a reaction, and having estimated that we were relatively complacent, have decided to take a further step.'[80] A few days later NSC staff member Richard Kennedy asked whether the Soviets intended to 'bring on a real confrontation with us or are they just testing to see how far they can go short of a confrontation?' He concluded that whatever the explanation might be 'the fact remains it is a significant political challenge for us.'[81]

A few weeks after the resolution of the crisis Kissinger conceded that 'the whole Soviet operation had been a deliberate try-on'. Its main objectives were to test US resilience, and had it been soft – to increase Soviet nuclear submarine capability in

[79] Modern explanations for Soviet motivations during this period suggest that Soviet interventionism outside Eastern Europe reached its peak by the mid 1970s, coinciding roughly with the rise of *détente* and the failure of the US to secure peace in Vietnam. According to Westad, one possible explanation was the high optimism in Soviet foreign policy at that time about reaching strategic parity with the US, and the belief that Moscow could change the world in its direction. A second explanation points to large expansion of Soviet military infrastructure and capabilities in the late 1960s following its involvement in the Third World. See Odd Arne Westad, 'Moscow and the Angolan Crisis, 1974–1976: A New Pattern of Intervention', The Woodrow Wilson Center of Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive: ⟨http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?fuseaction=library.document&topic_id=1409&id=163⟩ (date accessed 1 June 2004).

[80] Memo, Kissinger to Nixon, 'Soviet Naval Facility in Cuba', 22 September 1970 (folder: #6, 'NSC Meeting – Jordan 9/23/70'), *Meeting Files (1969–1974)–NSC Meetings*, NSC Institutional Files, BOX H-029, NPMP, NARA.

[81] Memo, Kennedy to Kissinger, 'Cuba Planning Meeting', 24 September 1970 (folder: #8, 'Chronology of Cuban Submarine Base Episode 1970–1971', 1 of 2), *Country Files–Latin America*, HAK Office Files, NSC Files, Box 128, NPMP, NARA.

the Western Hemisphere. Kissinger was convinced that 'There was no question of a genuine misunderstanding: This had been a deliberate ''act of treachery'' '.[82]

The lengths that the administration went through to ensure absolute secrecy and to avoid the spread of a crisis mood in the minds of the public prove how serious the situation was perceived to be. Furthermore, it could be argued that had the events taken place at another time, with no conjunction to other crises, the administration would have escalated the situation to a full, public confrontation with the Soviets over the buildup, along the lines of 1962.[83]

However, in the autumn of 1970 events in Jordan and Chile, along with the recent intervention in Cambodia, rendered this course of action politically hazardous. Nixon could not afford another international crisis with the Soviets – but at the same time he could not ignore the challenge when the Soviets were believed to be testing American resilience around the world. The administration therefore opted for a nuanced approach – fostering a no-crisis atmosphere publicly, while taking all the necessary steps to ensure the situation did not get out of control.

[82] Memo, Freeman to Douglas-Home, 29 October 1970: NA.

[83] In his 22 September memo to Nixon, Kissinger also outlined a range of possible actions: 'pursue a purely diplomatic effort to get the Soviets out; pursue a diplomatic course with Castro; move decisively diplomatically, making clear from the outset we are prepared to move to confrontation; confront the Soviets immediately'. Kissinger did not suggest a preferable option, but pointed out that 'whatever our initial course, we must be prepared to move toward confrontation if this is the price of Soviet withdrawal'. Memo, Kissinger to Nixon, 22 September 1970 (folder: #6, 'NSC Meeting – Jordan 9/23/70'), *Meeting Files (1969–1974)–NSC Meetings*, NSC Institutional Files, BOX H-029, NPMP, NARA..