

Details Emerge of Cold War Nuclear Threat by Cuba

By WILLIAM J. BROAD

In the early 1980s, according to newly released documents, Fidel Castro was suggesting a Soviet nuclear strike against the United States, until Moscow dissuaded him by patiently explaining how the radioactive cloud resulting from such a strike would also devastate Cuba.

The cold war was then in one of its chilliest phases. President Ronald Reagan had begun a trillion-dollar arms buildup, called the Soviet Union “an evil empire” and ordered scores of atomic detonations under the Nevada desert as a means of developing new arms. Some Reagan aides talked of fighting and winning a nuclear war.

Dozens of books warned that Reagan’s policies threatened to end most life on earth. In June 1982, a million protesters gathered in Central Park.

Barack Obama, then an undergraduate at Columbia University, worried about the nuclear threat and later wrote as a student and a journalist about ways to avoid global annihilation.

The future president didn’t know half the danger.

The National Security Archive, a private research group at George Washington University, recently made public documents that reveal the nuclear



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SOUGHT STRIKE Documents show that Fidel Castro, in the early 1980s, suggested that the Soviet Union mount a nuclear attack on the United States.

threat in new detail. The two-volume study, “Soviet Intentions 1965-1985,” was prepared in 1995 by a Pentagon contractor and based on extensive interviewing of former top Soviet military officials.

It took the security archive two years to get the Pentagon to release the study.

Censors excised a few sections on nuclear tests and weapon effects, and the archive recently posted the redacted study on its Web site.

The Pentagon study attributes the Cuba revelation to Andrian A. Danilevich, a Soviet general staff officer from

1964 to '90 and director of the staff officers who wrote the Soviet Union’s final reference guide on strategic and nuclear planning.

In the early 1980s, the study quotes him as saying that Mr. Castro “pressed hard for a tougher Soviet line against the U.S. up to and including possible nuclear strikes.”

The general staff, General Danilevich continued, “had to actively disabuse him of this view by spelling out the ecological consequences for Cuba of a Soviet strike against the U.S.”

That information, the general concluded, “changed Castro’s positions considerably.”

Moscow’s effort to enlighten Mr. Castro to the innate messiness of nuclear warfare is among a number of disclosures in the Pentagon study. Other findings in the study include how the Soviets strove for nuclear superiority but “understood the devastating consequences of nuclear war” and believed that the use of nuclear weapons had to be avoided “at all costs.”

The study includes a sharp critique of American analyses of Soviet intentions, saying the Pentagon tended to err “on the side of overestimating Soviet aggressiveness.”