

**JACK ANDERSON and DALE VAN ATTA**

## Cutting Soviet Strings on Third World

**A**s certified critics of the Defense Department's penchant for extravagant projects and suspicion of new ideas, we are delighted to break the news of an ingenious, small program the military has been running without fanfare for more than a year: "Bear's Spares."

The idea, like most good ones, is simplicity itself: Offer Third World countries maintenance and American-made spare parts for their Soviet military hardware. The aim is to make it easier for these nations to cut the strings the Soviet Union always attaches to military aid, yet avoid the need to buy new weapons they can't afford.

The Pentagon has deliberately kept the modest program under wraps. But we've learned that the two sparring partners of the Reagan Cabinet, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger and Secretary of State George P. Shultz, approved the plan in April 1984.

A small staff in the Defense Department's security assistance program was given the task of developing and implementing "Bear's Spares," and has supervised nearly \$50 million in contracts.

The program has concentrated on Africa, where Soviet pawprints have been a disturbing feature of the political landscape for years. The idea originated with Noel Koch, deputy assistant defense secretary for African affairs, who pointed out the problem that poor African nations have when they decide to back out of the Soviet bearhug but then are stuck with quantities of deteriorating military equipment.

Reagan administration officials were quick to grasp the potential of the United States stepping in

with maintenance expertise and spare parts. As Koch explained, the Soviets "deliberately seek to develop a dependency that requires a large presence in the country as well as an umbilical relationship with Moscow."

The Soviets do this by "providing only the most rudimentary training in maintaining equipment, some of which—by design—cannot even be maintained locally, but must be returned to the Soviet Union or elsewhere," he said. This system, plus the rapid accumulation of debts, soon results in a relationship like that between "field hands and the company store," Koch said.

Two countries that nearly became docile Soviet satellites through military aid were Egypt and Somalia. But both faced a hard choice when they booted the Soviets out: learn to live with crumbling, unreliable weapons or spend money they didn't have on new Western hardware.

The beauty of "Bear's Spares" is that the former Soviet clients now have a third option: for a relatively modest sum, learn from U.S. experts how to maintain their Soviet arms, and buy needed spare parts from American companies.

Small U.S. contractors are understandably enthusiastic about the program; more surprisingly, the big boys are, too. A Pentagon source explained: "They know the countries can't afford the big-ticket items, so it's a way for them to make a few bucks they wouldn't have made otherwise."

Another advantage of the program is that it probably saves American taxpayers a bundle by eliminating the need for U.S. military aid grants to buy new, expensive weapons.