

PBS MACNEIL-LEHRER REPORT  
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ANNOUNCER: President Reagan confronts a skeptical Congress and raises the political ante on Central America.

MACNEIL: Good evening. President Reagan takes the fairly rare step of going before a joint session of Congress this evening. His aim is to persuade a somewhat reluctant Congress to back him in resisting leftist forces in Central America. This dramatic gesture thus pushes the controversy over the U.S. role in El Salvador and Nicaragua to the top of Mr. Reagan's foreign policy agenda and raises the political heat surrounding it. This afternoon Mr. Reagan gave a preview of what's on his mind when he spoke to the American Newspaper Publishers Association in New York. REAGAN: This last point brings up the first responsibility of the president of the United States and of the Congress: the security of this country and the well-being of our people. Tonight I will speak directly to that issue in the context of Central America. We're not accustomed to thinking very much about that region, not accustomed to worrying about possibly a military threat in our own hemisphere. We've almost taken for granted the friendly independent neighbors that we have, but we can no longer ignore there's a fire started and burning in our front yard, and we must respond with both unity and firmness of purpose. The peoples of the hemisphere, this hemisphere, are all Americans, and all of us share a vital stake in the future of democracy and freedom. We have it within our power to act now to keep the situation manageable, and it's in this spirit that I shall speak to the Congress and to the nation tonight.

MACNEIL: Earlier today Mr. Reagan said in an interview with Gannett Newspapers that Central America does not add up to another Vietnam, a fear expressed by some of his congressional critics. Tonight with two leading critics and U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, the Central American policy debate that forms the background to tonight's presidential speech. Jim Lehrer is off; Charlayne Hunter-Gault is in Washington. Charlayne?

HUNTER-GAULT: Robin, the president's highly unusual move comes at a time when his Central American policy is mired in deep criticism and skepticism on Capitol Hill. That was underscored yesterday when an administration request for \$60 million in aid for El Salvador was cut in half by a House Appropriations Subcommittee. That committee also attached strings to the remaining \$30 million and extracted a pledge from the administration to name a special envoy to seek a negotiated peace in El Salvador. It is reported that former Sen. Richard Stone, Democrat of Florida who has been advising the administration on Central America policy, is in line for the post. Nicaragua is a sore spot as well. Amid charges that the administration is illegally funding covert operations in that country, the House Intelligence Committee meets tomorrow to consider cutting off funds for such actions against the Nicaraguan government. Thus, the man known as the great communicator faces a formidable test when he comes before the Congress tonight. Robin?

MACNEIL: The policy the president takes before Congress this evening was shaped in considerable part by his U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick. Mrs. Kirkpatrick has long believed that the U.S. should actively support those in Central America it sees as allies and oppose the forces that threaten them. Madam Ambassador, why does the situation in Central America warrant such a dramatic gesture by the president?  
KIRKPATRICK: Well, I think the president said it when he said that the first duty of

a president is to protect the security of this country, and he thinks, as I think, that the security and vital national interests of the United States is very much involved in Central America. It's very near us and strategically very important, which is why the Soviets are investing so much effort in there.

MACNEIL: He also said we can no longer ignore the fire burning in Central America, but in fact the United States has not been ignoring it, witness the controversy we've just described. Does that mean a bigger U.S. commitment is in the offing?

KIRKPATRICK: I think that what the president meant by no longer ignoring the fire was not that he had been ignoring but that a good many Americans remain unaware of it, unaware really of the importance of Central America to our security and unaware of what's going on there, what the size and scope and importance of the Soviet commitment in that area is, what its strategic threat to us is.

MACNEIL: Can you briefly describe what you think what is going on there, what the size and scope of that Soviet commitment is? KIRKPATRICK: Yes. I think that for a number of years now the Soviet Union has been investing many tens of millions, hundreds of millions of dollars, billions of dollars, in fact, in Cuba and building Cuba's military force, and in building its own military presence in this hemisphere, until today, for example, it has facilities for nuclear submarines off our shores and air reconnaissance over our vital sea lanes as well as over our own territory, and with good many evidences of an increase in that commitment. The extent to which there's a kind of international effort is very clear in Nicaragua where one sees not only arms from but also advisers and personnel and helpers and soldiers from all over the Soviet bloc--from East Germany and from Korea, North Korea, that is, and from Vietnam and from Libya. Only--from the PLO, I would say, rather an important PLO presence. Only today off the shore--Costa Rica announced that they had just apprehended a boat, a ship filled with Libyan arms headed for Nicaragua. We know that last week in Brazil three Libyan planes, four Libyan planes filled with arms were headed for Nicaragua. By the way, they lied about what was in them, of course, but what that does is illustrate the international character of the effort that's going on. There the whole Soviet bloc is involved. The investment is very large, and what they seek to do is develop a kind of stranglehold over the vital shipping lanes which half of all American crude oil passes through, which almost half, 44% of our trade passes through, which well over half of what we would supply to Europe in case of an emergency there passes through, so it's strategically very important to us.

MACNEIL: All right. Let's take El Salvador briefly. What is the administration purpose? Is it a political settlement in El Salvador or a military victory, then a political arrangement? KIRKPATRICK: The administration's purpose in El Salvador is very simple. It is to strengthen and reinforce a democratic government in El Salvador which will be independent and in which the Salvadorans will be able to control their own destiny. That's what we seek to do, what we hope...what we seek to do is to help the Salvadorans maintain control over their own destiny and not lose it to a very well-armed group of guerrillas directed out of Nicaragua, Cuba and the Soviet bloc.

MACNEIL: And what is the administration, put simply, in Nicaragua? (sic) Is it, as some have suggested, to overthrow the Sandinista government or to encourage others to overthrow it or to weaken it so that it may be overthrown, or what? KIRKPATRICK: Well, the administration's first objective in Nicaragua, this administration's, previous ones, too, has been in fact to try to encourage a democratic and peaceful Nicaragua. So far that hasn't succeeded. Its second objective in Nicaragua is to simply persuade Nicaragua to live at peace with its neighbors, and its most important, very short-run objective, I think, is to persuade Nicaragua to stop supplying large

quantities of arms and directing the subversion of El Salvador from Nicaraguan territory.

MACNEIL: Thank you. Charlayne?

HUNTER-GAULT: One of the staunchest congressional critics of the administration's Central American policy is Rep. Stephen Solarz, Democrat of New York. A member of the Western Hemisphere Affairs Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Congressman Solarz spent two weeks in Central America earlier this year. Congressman, do you think the situation in Central America warrants the kind of attention the president's giving to it? SOLARZ: I think that all of us in the Congress, Charlayne, even those who have been opposed to the administration's policy in that part of the world, recognize that there is a very serious situation. I think the disagreement we have with the administration is not over the seriousness of the problem but what are its causes and how best to deal with it.

HUNTER-GAULT: All right. You just heard Ambassador Kirkpatrick state the, what presumably the administration's concern. Are they and she overstating the extent of Soviet involvement in the region? SOLARZ: I don't think that there's any doubt that the Soviet Union, Cuba, Libya and other radical and communist countries are attempting to exacerbate the tensions which exist in Central America by providing arms to insurrectionary groups like the FMLNA in El Salvador, but we would contend that even if the Soviet Union, Cuba and Libya didn't exist, that given the history of social and economic injustice and inequity in El Salvador combined with the legacy of political repression, that the insurgencies which exist today would have developed anyway, and we think therefore that it is a very serious mistake to view the conflicts which are raging in Central America today as primarily a manifestation of the desire on the part of the Soviet Union to extend its influence in the region rather than as a manifestation of indigenous difficulties and problems which have existed for decades and which have not, unfortunately, been adequately dealt with.

HUNTER-GAULT: One of the things that the ambassador just said is the concern for the strategic security of this country, which she says is threatened by this expanding Soviet presence or foreign presence in the region. SOLARZ: I don't think there's anyone in the Congress who would look with equanimity on the military triumph of the guerrillas in El Salvador or looks with equanimity today on the existence of a Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Both of these situations obviously create problems for the United States, but at the same time, I must say that these Strangelovian (sic) strategic speculations contain a measure, in my view, of very substantial exaggeration. I think, for example, the whole notion that if the government in El Salvador falls that all of the other governments in Central America will inevitably and ineluctably fall as well until the day comes when communist guerrillas are attempting to cross the Rio Grande and invade the United States constitutes a very substantial exaggeration. There's no doubt that what happens in El Salvador will have an impact on what happens in the other countries in the region, but in the final analysis, what happens in Costa Rica, in Honduras, in Mexico and in Guatemala will primarily be a function of the indigenous conditions and circumstances in those countries themselves.

HUNTER-GAULT: Well, you just heard what the ambassador said are the goals and the aims--for example, in El Salvador to help them to determine their own destiny and formulate a strong democratic government. What's wrong with that? SOLARZ: Oh, I don't think that there's anything wrong with the policy of the administration as it was described by Ambassador Kirkpatrick, for whom, by the way, I have a great deal of

affection and a lot of respect, but on this issue I think we have a fundamental difference because I don't think that the administration's policy goes far enough. It's one thing to talk about trying to enhance political pluralism and genuine democracy in El Salvador. We all favor that. The question is how you achieve it, and in my view, the only way this can be achieved is through a political resolution of the conflict which will require, in my judgment, a dialogue between the government and the opposition, out of which hopefully can come an agreement in which genuinely free and fair elections are held, in which all sides can have confidence, in which the people of El Salvador can determine their own future.

HUNTER-GAULT: Then you're saying that you don't believe that the United States is genuinely trying to pursue a negotiated peace? SOLARZ: I don't believe we are, and the reason I say that is that the only way to achieve a negotiated settlement is through negotiations, and the only way to get negotiations going in the Salvadoran context is on the basis of an unconditional dialogue between the government and the opposition, which we have so far opposed.

HUNTER-GAULT: Very briefly, do you believe the administration is acting illegally in Nicaragua? SOLARZ: I'm not in a position to make a definitive judgement on that, but I will say that to the extent the administration contends that the purpose of our military assistance to the FDN operating out of Honduras in Nicaragua is to interdict the supply of arms from Nicaragua to El Salvador. I am unaware of any successes which have been achieved in that regard, and it's hard for me to understand how we can plausibly contend that we're providing arms to the FDN in Nicaragua.

HUNTER-GAULT: And that stands for? SOLARZ: For the Nicaraguan Democratic Front, for the purpose of preventing the flow of arms from Nicaragua to El Salvador, when the leaders of the FDN themselves have announced publicly that the purpose of their operation is in fact to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.

HUNTER-GAULT: All right. Robin?

MACNEIL: To take a couple of these points, Ambassador Kirkpatrick, the congressman says he thinks you are very substantially exaggerating the Soviet involvement in that and the threat. KIRKPATRICK: Actually, I don't even think he said that. I think he said he thinks somebody is exaggerating the Soviet presence in Central America, but he didn't say who, and of course that makes it a lot easier to....

MACNEIL: Who did you mean, Congressman? SOLARZ: Well, I mean....

MACNEIL: The administration generally? SOLARZ: I did not say, nor would I have said that the ambassador exaggerated the degree of Soviet involvement in the situation. There's no doubt that they are involved. What I did suggest was that the administration had exaggerated the strategic consequence of a collapse on the part of the government of El Salvador.

MACNEIL: With that corrected question, may I put that to you? KIRKPATRICK: Sure. I would just say that my good friend Steve Solarz has said himself that he would regard the conquest, victory of the Marxist-Leninist forces in El Salvador, as a very undesirable outcome. I'd just like to say we regard it as a very undesirable outcome, too. Communist El Salvador is a serious prospect. It's not something I think any American or any congressman would in fact welcome, and I think it's one we all in fact want to cooperate in trying to prevent. SOLARZ: If I could make a point here, Robin.

MACNEIL: Sure. SOLARZ: Let me say that I fully agree with the ambassador on that point. There's no one in the Congress, I think, who would look with equanimity on a guerrilla triumph in El Salvador. Our disagreement with the administration is over the best way to prevent it, and some of us are deeply concerned about the extent to which, in our judgement, the policy now being followed by the administration is likely to lead to the very result it's supposedly designed to prevent.

MACNEIL: What about that and the, just adding to it, the congressman's point that he doesn't believe the administration really is trying to achieve a negotiated settlement? KIRKPATRICK: That's actually very hard to understand because we try all the time at it. We try first of all by continuously making clear that our only goal is free, open and conclusive elections in which all parties in El Salvador will participate, and we try to make clear, not only to the Congress, to the Salvadorans, to everybody that we will do everything in our power to ensure that all parties in El Salvador will in fact be secure and able to participate and that we hope only that they are willing to stop shooting at each other and in fact talk, talk in the context of democratic elections.

MACNEIL: Well, if they are unwilling, does that mean pursuing a military solution until they are defeated? KIRKPATRICK: I think that the only time one has to pursue a military solution is when people are shooting at you. Unfortunately, what's happened in El Salvador is that the guerrillas keep shooting. You know, Steve, I know you don't like to talk about the Soviet presence, but if you read the Soviet theoretical journals, you find people like \*Mekoyan and a lot of others saying again and again that in Latin America the armed road is the only road, and in El Salvador itself, one has found \*Chepengandal, the head of the Salvadoran Communist Party and now thought to be the strongest man in the FMLN, saying that military victory will be theirs and that they seek a military victory. Problem: what do you do when they keep shooting?

SOLARZ: Well, I think there's an answer to that question, if I may be permitted to offer it, and that is that if in fact the opposition in El Salvador rejects a fair and genuine offer to bring the war to an end through political means, and if the government in El Salvador simultaneously eliminates the death squads which they're now operating, which are responsible for the murder of literally thousands of their own people, then I think under those circumstances we should be providing whatever military assistance they need, but right now the problem is that what the government in El Salvador in effect says to the opposition is that they should lay down their arms and come into an electoral process supervised by the security forces of El Salvador. That's no more realistic than it would be for the guerrillas to say to the government of El Salvador that they should lay down their arms and enter an electoral process supervised by the guerrillas. If there is gonna be a solution based on an electoral process, it seems to me it can only come about on the basis of an unconditional dialogue, out of which hopefully might emerge a solution more or less along the lines of the one that made possible peace in Zimbabwe, in which the security forces are confined to their barracks, the guerrillas are confined to their bases, and a regional peacekeeping force comes in to supervise the election.

MACNEIL: We have to move on, Congressman. Charlayne?

HUNTER-GAULT: The architect of the compromise plan that cut the administration's military aid fund request for El Salvador is the chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee, Clarence Long, a Democrat of Maryland. A frequent visitor to Central America, Congressman Long has just returned from a weekend trip to El Salvador. Congressman, you're quoted as saying that the reason you supported cutting the aid request in half was so that you could have leverage with the administration--leverage

for what? LONG: Well, that's part of the reason. I do think you're never going to get a solution to that thing, a peaceful solution, unless you can bring the guerrilla forces to the negotiating table, and they're not going to come as long as they have freedom to blow up bridges and power lines and then have the American taxpayer pay to rebuild them. Now you have to, has to be a military stick, let's say, and it's gotta be a stick, not a wet noodle, which is what it's been so far, so some military aid has to be given. Now to give to it all that the administration wanted would have been simply to say we're giving everything you want now without reference to what you're gonna be able to do to carry through these various peace negotiations that we're asking you to do, these various moves towards human rights and the conviction of the killers of the nuns and that sort of thing.

HUNTER-GAULT: Is that why you attached the strings that you attached, as well as made the cut? LONG: Oh, yeah, I think the solution--and I agree with Congressman Solarz here--is not a military solution. We've had 300 years of murder and warfare in El Salvador. Communism is just the latest name for it.

HUNTER-GAULT: All right, so one of the strings you attached was a special envoy. How do you expect him to make a difference? LONG: Well, I expect him to talk to both sides to try to bring them to the negotiating table, to set up, above all, an election which would be available, as congressman, as Ambassador Kirkpatrick said, all parts of the, all shades of philosophy and so on, everyone, and that would include the communists. Let them come into the electoral process and have them free to take their case to constituents, access to the media and protection against being murdered, because \*Amoro told me, one of the guerrilla leaders, if he had taken part in the last election (inaudible)...he would have been murdered, and I don't know anyone who seriously disputes that.

HUNTER-GAULT: The other string you attached involved, strings, involved human rights, and you alluded to that a moment ago. Why did you think that was necessary? LONG: Well, I don't know quite why you asked that question. There have been 15,000 murders in El Salvador in the last two years, and not one single murderer has been convicted--not a single conviction.

HUNTER-GAULT: So you're saying you don't think the U.S. has been strong enough on pushing for this, or just what? LONG: Well, we certainly.... We've asked them to do it, but we haven't stipulated that as part of any of our foreign aid requests heretofore, but now they agree, and I think the existence of outside force, such as ours, telling them they're not going to get the weaponry that they claim they need unless they take definite moves to bring the killers of human beings to justice. That helps them. They can say, well, gee, we may not want to do it. We've got to do it because the United States is stipulating this.

HUNTER-GAULT: All right. Robin?

MACNEIL: Ambassador Kirkpatrick, back to the general point. The New Yorker magazine says this week that Central America is not in any way like Vietnam, except in U.S. policy, because it appears to be reviving the domino theory. Is that in fact what the administration believes, that if unless you stop them in El Salvador and Nicaragua, the whole of Central America will go communist? KIRKPATRICK: I think that the most.... I think we think that there is a very large danger of contagion in Central America. You know the fact is that the Soviets have a habit of using each country which they conquer as the base for the next conquest, so that they took, for example, they gained control effectively of Nicaragua, and they used Nicaragua as the base for

their conquest of El Salvador. Now there's no.... They've already announced just last week from Nicaragua, interestingly enough, the formation of a new united front to try to overthrow the government of Honduras, and the government of Nicaragua is right now threatening, on a fairly serious basis and continuing one, the independent Democratic government of Costa Rica, so the notion that there's more than one or two governments involved here is not a matter of anybody's fantasies. It's a matter of facts that exist right now.

MACNEIL: Congressman Long, do you think the administration has revived the domino theory? LONG: Well, there's no question about it. They would.... I think they believe genuinely that any fall of El Salvador might lead to a fall of other countries.

MACNEIL: Do you believe that? LONG: Well, I think it's something you can't completely reject, but I'm not, I'm not sold completely on it, no.

MACNEIL: Uh huh. How do you answer that? KIRKPATRICK: Well, I don't think anything is inevitable, let me say, in history. What I think is clear is that already, not later but now, the other governments in the area are in some sense targeted by the communist forces based in Nicaragua and before that Cuba. We think it's much more likely, should the government of El Salvador fall which we do not think will happen because we fully expect the Congress will cooperate in preventing that, let me say, but were it to happen, then it would increase the likelihood of effective communist challenge in overthrow the government of Honduras or Costa Rica. I think that's almost common sense.

MACNEIL: How great a U.S. effort is it worth to stop that, to stop what you foresee in Central America? KIRKPATRICK: Well, I think it's worth quite a large effort because I think Central America, what happens in Central America is directly important to the U.S. national security.

MACNEIL: Congressman Long, I think you had a comment. LONG: Well, I think the emphasis on communism is somewhat overdrawn. I don't see that the guerrillas taking over the government of El Salvador in the first instances, the first consequence of what's going on there. I think much more likely, and I haven't heard this seriously challenged in my conversations with people in Salvador, a right-wing military coup leading to a blood bath, and my theory is that that would be the first thing that would happen, and then, of course, the left would become polarized; you'd wipe out the middle ground and make a peaceful solution or negotiation almost impossible.

MACNEIL: We have to leave it there and come back to it after the president has spoken this evening. Thank you, Congressman Long, Congressman Solarz, Ambassador Kirkpatrick. Good night, Charlayne.

HUNTER-GAULT: Good night, Robert.

MACNEIL: That's all for tonight. We'll be back tomorrow night. I'm Robert MacNeil. Good night.