

RADIO TV REPORTS, INC.

4701 WILLARD AVENUE, CHEVY CHASE, MARYLAND 20815 656-4068

FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

PROGRAM The Lawmakers

STATION WETA-TV
PBS Network

DATE April 28, 1983 8:00 P.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Cokie Roberts Reports: The President's Speech

PAUL DUKE: The President's speech was a bold attempt by Mr. Reagan to mobilize public opinion behind the view that a greater U.S. commitment is essential in Latin America. Cokie Roberts has been talking to senators and representatives, and we'll have a report on their reaction.

COKIE ROBERTS: Most lawmakers seem pleased at the style of the President's speech, if not all of the substance.

DUKE: Actually, the Administration has had trouble over its Latin policies ever since Mr. Reagan took office, which, as Linda Wertheimer tells us, is the reason the President felt compelled to make the trip to the Capitol in the first place.

LINDA WERTHEIMER: Lately, Paul, the President's policies have been taking a beating in Congress, and he clearly decided it was time to pull out all the stops and rescue what he could. He tried to ease a skittish Congress into line.

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: We've discussed all of these issues, and more, with leaders and members of the Congress. Their views have helped shape our own thinking. And I believe that we've developed a common course to follow.

WERTHEIMER: It was seven weeks ago that a conciliatory-sounding President announced that he would ask Congress to work with him to provide additional military aid to El Salvador, money, the President emphasized, important for the welfare of both nations.

PRESIDENT REAGAN: The nations of Central America are among our nearest neighbors. El Salvador, for example is nearer

OFFICES IN: WASHINGTON D.C. • NEW YORK • LOS ANGELES • CHICAGO • DETROIT • AND OTHER PRINCIPAL CITIES

Material supplied by Radio TV Reports, Inc. may be used for file and reference purposes only. It may not be reproduced, sold or publicly demonstrated or exhibited.

to Texas than Texas is to Massachusetts. Central America is simply too close and the strategic stakes are too high for us to ignore the danger of governments seizing power there with ideological and military ties to the Soviet Union.

WERTHEIMER: Without American help supporting the government, the Administration fears leftists could seize power in El Salvador. Congressional opponents disagree.

MAN: What the Administration fears most, it is contributing most to. If they follow their policy, there's a far greater likelihood of a Marxist government in El Salvador than if we tried a negotiated solution. And the Administration is following a policy that allows the guys with the guns to determine the future of El Salvador, not the politicians.

WERTHEIMER: Politicians in the United States began meeting immediately on the President's request for military aid to El Salvador. Four congressional committees have the power to say how much aid and under what conditions. And many members don't see the situation as the President's men do.

MAN: If we simply wash our hands of the conflict, then indeed, Mr. Chairman, the military strength that the Soviets and the Cubans have assembled in the region is quite adequate to turn Central America into another Eastern Europe.

MAN: It seems to me that, in a sense, you've become your own worst enemy, with all the rhetoric about -- it's not that El Salvador itself reminds people of Vietnam, it's what you all are saying reminds people of Vietnam. It's talking about, you know, we're going to have an Eastern Europe in Latin America and we're going to have a -- the dominoes are falling. And even if it's all true, I would have thought you could have come up with something different.

WERTHEIMER: Vivid memories of Vietnam concern the congressmen and their constituents. Older members heard other Presidents make assurances and gave them support. Younger ones ran against politicians who supported that war.

El Salvador, they all agree, is different, a neighbor nation where our interests are plainly involved. But the concern about military possibilities remains strong.

MAN: I hear from people my parents', my father's age more than I do from younger people on this issue.

SENATOR DANIEL INOUE: I'm always haunted by the fact that I did support this conflict in the beginning. Because, whether directly or indirectly, my decision played a role in the

death of men and the expenditure of our treasury.

WERTHEIMER: The doubts of a moderate like Inouye raise questions for other members of Congress, a quiet man, a Democrat who tries to support Presidents of either party on foreign policy questions. Inouye's concerns led members of both parties to reconsider support for the Administration.

MAN: I think we're building a strong bipartisan coalition in Congress that transcends what the Administration thinks is the traditional opponents of the Administration on this issue.

MAN: The fact of the matter is, the American public are getting growingly concerned. The international public opinion is growingly concerned. And most importantly, the results that our policy are leading to are dramatically awful.

WERTHEIMER: Congressional concerns about U.S. Latin American policy were intensified by recent and renewed charges that the United States is involved in a secret war against Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government. President Reagan acknowledges aiding the guerrillas in Nicaragua, but says the aid is tied to El Salvador, that the leftist government in Nicaragua is helping leftist insurgents in El Salvador.

MAN: And what I can say is that your Intelligence Committee is as concerned about the substance of the allegations concerning paramilitary activities in Nicaragua and Central America as all of you.

WERTHEIMER: Last December, that concern led Congress to pass a special amendment to restrain the Administration. The Boland Amendment says federal funds may not be used for military aid for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua. The President says that's not what his Administration intends, but the Congress is not entirely convinced.

It became clearer every day that differences between the Congress and the President on Nicaraguan policy affect El Salvador as well.

MAN: Members who follow these issues closely are trying to look at the Central America policy as a whole and not, you know, simply isolate what are we doing in Guatemala or what are we doing vis-a-vis Nicaragua or Salvador.

WERTHEIMER: Of the four committees with authority over aid to El Salvador, the House Foreign Affairs Committee said no additional aid. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee granted half the aid request, with some restrictions. The Senate Appro-

priations approved all the aid, but with very tight restrictions. And this week the House Appropriations Committee made its decision.

REP. CLARENCE LONG: Today we're meeting to vote on the Administration's proposal to reprogram \$60 million in foreign military sales credits to El Salvador.

WERTHEIMER: Chairman Long, just returned from Latin America, made an agreement with the Administration. He'd keep the aid alive, agreeing to half the amount, if the President would appoint a special envoy to the region.

REP. LONG: Never before -- we've offered to spend many millions of dollars on aid to all kinds of countries. Never before have we ever got anything for the money. This time we're getting a little something. We're getting some concessions from the Administration.

WERTHEIMER: The more critical members of the committee felt that kind of concession would not help the situation.

MAN: Very frankly, once that ambassador is appointed, the Administration will have an excuse to say to Congress, "Look, boys. You asked for this. And now as long as we have an ambassador appointed at your request, you have an obligation to meet our funding requests."

WERTHEIMER: Republicans made a plainly futile plea for the Congress to go along with the President on foreign policy.

MAN: If we make the wrong decision here today, we are risking the collapse of the government in El Salvador. And we are thereby risking the security of every man, woman and child in this country. I think that we should fulfill the President's complete request for \$60 million.

WERTHEIMER: The chairman's compromise carried in the House committee, pleasing the chairman, but very few others. Then the Congress waited to hear from the President in an atmosphere of concern and skepticism.

MAN: Now, if he, you know, addresses the kind of concerns that the members of Congress have about the political, social, economic problems of the region, if that's the principal focus of his speech, I think he'll get a very good reception. If, on the other hand, he gives a speech, sort of a classic Republican the-Reds-are-coming stump speech, I think he's going to get a very negative reception and he'll further divide people rather than pull people together.

WERTHEIMER: Lawmakers of both parties waited to see what the President's rhetoric would be, Republicans with some trepidation, worrying that Ronald Reagan might appear to be too militaristic. So it was with relief that they received the President's opening remarks.

PRESIDENT REAGAN: A number of times in past years, members of Congress and a President have come together in meetings like this to resolve a crisis. I have asked for this meeting in the hope that we can prevent one.

WERTHEIMER: Even one of the harshest opponents of the El Salvador policy approved of the tone of the President's speech.

MAN: He certainly played down the rhetoric from past speeches. We didn't have the flamboyant, really militaristic rhetoric of Alexander Haig in years gone by.

WERTHEIMER: And one Republican critic seemed somewhat mollified.

WOMAN: I think he made a lot of good statements, and I did support the statements that he made when they were applauded. I think it was significant to that extent. And also, it was a comprehensive statement on his policy in Central America, particularly with respect to El Salvador and Nicaragua. And I think it was important to the President to make this policy statement, because the American people have questioned our intervention in Central America. So he spelled out and outlined his reasonings and rationale behind his current policy there.

WERTHEIMER: Because the American people have questioned the policy, their representatives have been hesitant to implement it. The President had to convince not only the members of Congress, but also their constituents that Central America matters to them.

PRESIDENT REAGAN: El Salvador is nearer to Texas than Texas is to Massachusetts. Nicaragua is just as close to Miami as San Antonio, San Diego and Tucson as those cities are to Washington, where we are gathered tonight.

REP. GERRY STUDDS: Well, that's all very interesting. The Soviet Union is nearer to Alaska than any of them are to Washington. But it's irrelevant.

REP. CHARLES WILSON: Congressman Studds is from Massachusetts and I'm from Texas. Mexico and El Salvador and Guatemala are lot closer to my state than they are to his.

WERTHEIMER: Talk about how close Central America is scares some people who worry the President could send the Marines. Mr. Reagan went out of his way to allay those fears.

PRESIDENT REAGAN: There is no thought of sending American combat troops to Central America. They are not needed.

WOMAN: The only time that I noticed a bipartisan applause is when the President mentioned that he had no intentions of sending troops into Central America.

MAN: I was struck by one thing in the chamber tonight, and that is the extent to which the reaction to the President's speech divided along partisan lines. With one exception, the standing ovations were led almost entirely by members on the Republican side. The exception, interestingly enough, was when the President said that there was no need to send American combat troops to Central America, which immediately provoked a standing set of cheers from the Democratic side.

WERTHEIMER: If the President did answer one of the fears of the American people, he failed to answer another. He said nothing about justice for the murderers of American nuns in El Salvador. Instead, he praised the El Salvador government.

PRESIDENT REAGAN: The government of El Salvador has been keeping its promises.

WERTHEIMER: But members of Congress say the murder of the nuns stands as the biggest stumbling block to support for aid to El Salvador.

REP. LONG: Fifteen thousand murders in two years without one single conviction, not one. And the American nuns, who were raped and murdered, beaten and murdered by soldiers, one of whom confessed. And then the cases were remanded to another court.

WOMAN: ...members of Congress who are asked to vote for additional assistance and for assistance, in any category, to Central America, and specifically El Salvador, that we have also the right to expect that, in return, that they are going to uphold the rights of their people and that they will pursue justice for the murders of the nuns and for others who have died in El Salvador.

WERTHEIMER: Lawmakers say it's hard enough to get aid for friendly nations in these times, much less governments that people distrust. But the President made his pitch.

PRESIDENT REAGAN: What the Administration is asking for

in behalf of freedom in Central America is so small, so minimal, considering what is at stake.

MAN: If you look at what we have given to El Salvador alone in the last two years -- and I believe that totals some \$700 million of assistance, as Senator Dodd pointed out -- that that really exceeds what has gone to our local governments here in the United States for maternal and children health programs.

WERTHEIMER: The question now will be whether the President was able to overcome the objections of the people, to convince them to convince their representatives to support him on El Salvador.

PRESIDENT REAGAN: This is not a partisan issue. It is a question of our meeting our moral responsibility to ourselves, our friends, and our posterity.

REP. LONG: I think he's going to get a lot of support, letters of support. But I think it's going to evoke a tremendous storm of opposition from people who are against it. And this is going to cause them to reach for their children's notepaper and send a letter in. So, when the two wash out, I don't think it's going to come out to a net gain.

MAN: I think the speech will be very effective in making a lot of members stop and think just what is it that we're about to do.

WERTHEIMER: What Congress does do will probably depend on how the President's speech played back in the lawmakers' home districts. So far, public opinion's been strongly opposed to aid to El Salvador, and members of Congress have felt politically brave to give the President even half of what he wants.

*

*

*

WERTHEIMER: The latest congressional attempt to deal with foreign policy has ended in apparent success, Paul. The President has appointed that special envoy to the Central American region that the House Appropriations Committee made the price of their support for aid for El Salvador. The President's man in Central America will be Richard Stone. He's a former Senator from Florida.

There is some controversy here. Stone has been paid to lobby for Guatemala, and that may be a problem in his confirmation. And then, of course, as we heard some critics of the Latin American policy are critical of this idea too.

DUKE: And the next step, Cokie?

COKIE ROBERTS: Well, the first next step was postponed; and that was the day after the President's speech, the House Intelligence Committee was scheduled to vote on cutting off funds to the CIA to have covert actions in Nicaragua. The Intelligence Committee decided to postpone that vote until after a very unusual secret session of the House of Representatives. The House doesn't usually go into secret sessions. It leaves that to the Senate. Because most people think that it's pretty silly to think of 435 people trying to keep a secret.

It does give the Intelligence Committee an opportunity, though, to play the President's game. The Intelligence Committee is briefed by the CIA and others on secret situations, and they know what's going on. They've heard the President selectively declassify, tell secrets to support his position. They can't do that, except in a secret session.