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Nightline -

Subject: Expulsion of U.S. diplomats
from Nicaragua on charges of an
attempted assassination.

Guest: Former Senator Frank Church

ABC NIGHTLINE

6 June 1983

KOPPEL: ABC's Carl Bernstein reports that a House Foreign Affairs Committee is expected to vote tomorrow to cut off funds for covert CIA aid aimed at crippling the Sandinista government. Senate committees already have voted a similar cutoff by September 30, but Bernstein reports that congressmen responsible for overseeing the CIA are skeptical about today's charges by Nicaragua.

BERNSTEIN: Despite heightened congressional concern about the CIA's activities in Central America, those congressmen most familiar with the agency's operations, members of the House and Senate Intelligence Committees, have expressed skepticism that the agency would engage in any assassination plots. Such action, they note, is forbidden by law, and the danger to the CIA, if it was found to be secretly plotting murders of Nicaraguan leaders, would be enormous, international embarrassment, a probable cut-off of funds for dozens of covert operations around the world, far-reaching investigations, and for the Reagan administration extensive political damage, but among members of Congressional Intelligence Committees, as well as members of the intelligence gathering community there was little doubt expressed that officials of the embassy staff in Managua have extensive contacts with the Sandinistas' political opposition. Part of the \$19 million in covert operations against the Nicaraguan regime is earmarked for building popular support for an opposition front in the country, but there has been no suggestion by congressional sources that these plans include assassination attempts. CIA Director William Casey, say members of Congress, has become increasingly angered by questions raised on Capitol Hill about covert activities in the hemisphere, leading to a recent outburst in which congressmen say Casey shouted at them, quote, 'Who lost Central America is going to be the big issue in the next presidential election.' This is Carl Bernstein for Nightline in Washington.

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KOPPEL: It is generally conceded that the Reagan administration is engaged in covert activities supporting opponents of the left-wing government in Nicaragua, but when it comes to details on those activities the usual U.S. response is a terse 'no comment.' Today, however, the U.S. government lost no time in flatly denying charges that U.S. diplomats were conspiring to assassinate top Nicaraguan leaders. Three American diplomats flew out of Managua, Nicaragua, tonight after they were declared persona non grata by the Nicaraguan government. Linda Pfeifel, David Noble Greig and Ermila Rodriguez were accused by the Nicaraguan government of plotting criminal activities against Nicaragua, including assassination attempts. The story now from Nightline correspondent Betsy Aaron. MIGUEL D'ESCOTO: The talks have been shelved for the time being because after all they have said that....

AARON: This is the man, Nicaraguan foreign minister, the Reverend Miguel D'Escoto, whom three American Embassy employees in Nicaragua are accused of plotting to assassinate, the three accused of working for the Central Intelligence Agency. In Managua a U.S. embassy spokesman called the charges, simply absurd, a statement echoed in Washington at the State Department. ALAN ROMBERG (State Dept. Spokesman): Among other things they suggested that these people were engaged in planning for assassination activities. We have rather consistently denied any such activities. *LENIN CERNA: (Speaking in Spanish).

AARON: The Nicaraguans outlined their charges this afternoon at a news conference run by Lenin Cerna, head of the state security police. Said Cerna, 'We are here to show you once again what the CIA has been doing.' What it had allegedly been doing was recruiting this woman, *Marlena Moncotta, a secretary working in the Nicaraguan embassy in Honduras. Under orders from her government, Moncotta returned to Nicaragua and went to work as a double agent, spying both for the United States and Nicaragua. Reading from a text, Ms. Moncotta told of numerous phone calls and letters from Ermila Rodriguez, a second secretary at the U.S. embassy, her American contact. Then the evidence: hollow bookends with room enough to hold code books for deciphering messages sent by two-way radio; a pad, its pages made of edible paper; a bottle of brandy laced with a lethal poison, the brandy allegedly intended for Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto. The Rev. D'Escoto had often charged the United States with trying to destabilize and to overthrow his government. In 1982 at a news conference in Managua: D'ESCOTO (Filmclip): The United States has decided to launch an invasion against Nicaragua.

AARON: And in April of this year on this program: D'ESCOTO (Filmclip): They conceived it. They are directing it. They are financing it, and the United States is also arming it.

AARON: Today's news conference ended with a Nicaraguan-made film showing Ms. Moncotta entering a restaurant in Managua, this her first alleged contact with the Americans. These scenes were set to music by the Nicaraguans. Through a series of still photographs and videotape Moncotta is seen entering and leaving a car with Ermila Rodriguez. On May 31, Moncotta says she received a phone call telling her to pick up the liquor bottle beside a tree. She did on camera. That was less than a week ago. Yesterday the Nicaraguans decided to pull the plug on this so-called CIA operation, announcing the expulsion of three U.S. embassy employees and tonight Ermila Rodriguez, second secretary; Linda Pfeifel, a political affairs officer; and David Greig, a first

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secretary flew out of Managua, the first Americans ordered to leave Nicaragua. This Betsy Aaron for Nightline in New York.

KOPPEL: In a moment we'll talk with Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto, who, say the Nicaraguans, was targeted by the CIA for assassination, and later the 15th anniversary of the death of Robert Kennedy. We'll talk live with his eldest son, Joseph Kennedy, II.

KOPPEL: At this point we were scheduled to talk via satellite with Miguel D'Escoto, the foreign minister of Nicaragua. Unfortunately we've just lost our satellite link. Joining us, however, here in our Washington studio is the former chairman of the Central Intelligence Committee Frank Church of Idaho. It was he who spoke at an earlier time of the CIA being like a rogue elephant, other words, an organization that had gone totally out of control. Sen. Church, considering all that happened during your tenure and since, is it feasible, do you think, that the CIA would once again be involved in assassination attempts against leaders of foreign governments? CHURCH: Well, Ted, I would certainly hope not. I, I find it hard to believe that we would again stoop to that kind of activity in the world. The problem is that even if this is a hoax, a set-up, many people will believe it in Latin America because it is a known fact that the CIA did involve itself in assassination attempts in the past against Castro. It was implicated in the assassination of Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. It sought to seek, or it sought to assassinate Lumumba at one time in Africa. General Rene Schneider in Chile, who having been a West Point graduate, opposed an army take-over of an elected government, and there was a passing of weapons to one of two groups that were known to be intending to kidnap the general. He was later assassinated in that kidnap attempt, so these are known facts of the past, and that's, that's the thing that always made me believe that in addition to being wrong, once revealed we paid too heavy a political price.

KOPPEL: Well, let me ask you a question about that. In all the weeks of hearings that you had on this particular subject, what conclusion did you reach as to the motivations, then, because that must always have been in the backs of the minds of those who were planning these things, if this ever comes out there's gonna be hell to pay.

CHURCH: Well, you see, I think that that was never thought through. There was a period in our history when we regarded our presidents, and they regarded themselves as kind of super godfathers who were entitled to take actions of this kind. Had it been thought through, they would have realized that in a free society like ours it's just a question of time until these assassination attempts, like other covert operations, become known, and then the political price we pay is immense. I mean there are parts of this world that make no distinction between the United States and the Soviet Union anymore because of this kind of sordid activity, and that's, that's a terrible shame because we lose, in the eyes of so many people in the world, the very values that we hold most dear and make us such a special society.

KOPPEL: Follow up for a moment, if you would, on the thinking that lay behind what you said a couple of moments ago. You spoke of the possibility of a set-up. We are in the middle, once again, of a certain period of self-examination. Why do you think there might be a set-up, and how would you think that had been framed up? CHURCH: Well, I can see, you know, I don't know whether the truth or the falsity of this matter. How, how can I judge, or any of us at this point, but I can see how the Nicaraguans, for example, might appeal to the sympathy of other countries in Central

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America and indeed throughout Latin America by implicating the CIA in another effort to assassinate the leaders of the Nicaraguan regime. I mean it plays to their advantage to the extent that it's believed. I hope that it isn't so. I, I'm sorry that it will be, nonetheless, widely believed, and that, that's damaging to us.

KOPPEL: There is, is there not, a law that was passed about 10 years ago against the assassination of foreign leaders? I can see people in other parts of the world and perhaps even some people in this country looking a little cynically at that and saying, come on, if these were people who were worried about the law, we wouldn't have to be concerned in the first place. What good does a law like that do? CHURCH: Well, I think that if we don't, if our own government doesn't obey the law, then the government sets an impossible example for the people. I think that this law is enforceable. I think that it will be obeyed. I'm not one who assumes on the basis of these revelations today that the CIA has again reverted to assassination attempts abroad. The committee concluded that on the, on the basis of our investigation of such assassination efforts in the past that the price we paid was much too high, that the United States should not desert its own principles, and that when we do that we really play into the hands of our enemies, and, ah, so we recommended against covert operations, not only assassinations but covert operations generally, except in extreme circumstances where the vital security and survival of our own republic called for such action.

KOPPEL: There seems to have been a little slippage on those grounds already. CHURCH: Oh, yes, clearly. Clearly we're reverting under this administration to practices of the past that did not serve the best interest of this country and should not be in our, on our public agenda. They should not be a part of our governmental operation broad.