

20 October 1983

NICARAGUA/
U.S. AID

JENNINGS: Good evening. For the second time in three months, the House of Representatives has said no to one of President Reagan's policies in Central America. The House has voted to cut off covert aid for those forces fighting the government in Nicaragua--covert aid, which the president defended as recently as last night. As Charles Gibson reports from Capitol Hill, the decision was not made until there had been a heated and sometimes bitter debate.

GIBSON: House Intelligence Committee Chairman Edward Boland has made it almost a personal crusade to cut off CIA financing for guerrillas in Nicaragua. He argues the Reagan administration is trying to overthrow the Nicaraguan government with the guerrillas and that U.S. support for them make this country the meddler, the bully in the region. And Boland has support from the House leadership. REP. TIP O'NEILL (Speaker of the House): When a government is a government of the people and a true government of the people, we certainly shouldn't be trying to overthrow it. And I think that's a long policy for this government to follow.

GIBSON: Opponents argue a cutoff in covert aid to the guerrillas just demonstrates U.S. impotence. REP. HENRY HYDE (R-Ill.): We're consigned to the role of the poor, lumbering Gulliver, tied down by wimpish, Lilliputian congressional inaction--a Congress that hasn't the will or the wit to resist leftist socialist ideology.

GIBSON: The president, last night, strongly defended covert activities of the kind the CIA is financing in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan foreign minister at the State Department, today, was complaining that when the president defends covert action he defends violations of international law. MIGUEL D'ESCOTO (Nicaraguan foreign minister): What is covert action, if not a euphemism that is used in the United States to signify actions of destabilization to signify political murders, to signify sabotage.

GIBSON: But House Democrats knew earlier in the day they had the votes to defeat President Reagan. They confidently scrapped a planned secret House session to debate the issue. The key vote was 227-to-194 to cut off the covert aid. It was the exact same margin by which the House voted for the cutoff four months ago. That vote was ignored by the Republican Senate, and the Senate could well ignore this vote as well. But House Democratic leaders say they plan to keep attaching the aid cutoff to critical money bills so that the Senate and the president have to act on the issue. Charles Gibson, ABC News, Capitol Hill.