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SUBJECT Central America

DENNIS WHOLEY: Right now we're going to talk about Central America. The political conventions, the Olympics, and Geraldine Ferraro's taxes have pushed Central America off the front pages of the newspapers. Our guest says there's more going on there than we know about. We're going to talk about that tonight. He is Stephen Goose. He is a senior research analyst at the Center for Defense Information.

Good to have you here tonight.

STEPHEN GOOSE: Good evening.

WHOLEY: What's the Center for Defense Information all about?

GOOSE: We're a private research group in Washington, D.C. headed up by senior retired military officers. We address the entire range of military topics. We're oftentimes called a Pentagon watchdog group.

WHOLEY: Would you say it leans to the left, leans to the right?

GOOSE: We like to think we're right down the middle. We support a strong defense, but we don't like policies or programs that we consider excessive or that increase the risk of nuclear war or that might lead the U.S. into foreign involvements which are ill-advised.

WHOLEY: Where do you get your money?

GOOSE: Private foundations, private contributions.

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WHOLEY: Do you have membership?

GOOSE: We do not have membership. People who receive our monthly publication, the Defense Monitor, will send us in money, but we're not a membership group.

WHOLEY: Okay. You have a very strong statement in one of the recent issues that says the United States military policy is preparing for direct war in Central America. What's the basis of that conclusion?

GOOSE: Well, the U.S. military has been very, very busy in Central America over the past year and a half. We've been building military facilities in Honduras which could be used for future interventions throughout the region. We have been practicing for war in the region. We've been conducting maneuvers on the ground, in the air, at sea. We've been increasing the number of U.S. military personnel in the region. And you add it all up and it doesn't lead one to believe that an invasion is inevitable, but it certainly is pretty strong evidence that we're preparing for such a contingency in the future.

You say in your literature that the target -- and I've never heard anybody express it this clearly before -- that the target is to topple the Sandinista government.

GOOSE: Well, the Reagan Administration has made it very clear from the beginning that it does not like the Sandinistas. In fact, the Republican platform states quite clearly that the continuation of a Marxist-Leninist regime in this hemisphere is unacceptable. They've played around with their language a little bit, saying that the support of the Contras, who are the anti-Nicaraguan-government guerrillas, is designed just to harass and intimidate the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. But it's pretty clear, I think, that what they have in mind, eventually, is the overthrow of that government.

WHOLEY: The President and his advisers, and certainly many people in the United States, fear a Soviet presence, a Cuban presence, a Communist presence throughout Central America. Obviously, it's there to some degree.

What do you say about that?

GOOSE: Well, there is no doubt that Nicaragua has received a significant amount of aid from the Soviet Union, and from Cuba in particular. Cuba and Nicaragua are very close. Soviet aid, Soviet Bloc aid to Nicaragua has been roughly equal to American aid to El Salvador, which in my view is excessive. It's been several hundred million dollars since 1979, when the Sandinistas came to power.

What is not clear, however, is the degree to which the Soviets and the Nicaraguans are aiding the revolution in El Salvador, which is the main point that the Administration likes to bring out. They've yet to present any convincing evidence on that point.

WHOLEY: We have a map which we're going to ask Clark to put up on the screen that shows some diagrams, some activity around Nicaragua. Could you tell us what we're talking a look at?

GOOSE: Well, this map highlights a lot of the different activities that I mentioned at the very beginning. We can see there that they're building a lot of different airfields, that they're building radar sites, that they have proposed weapons storage depots. This is all in Honduras.

In addition to that, the little flare-ups that you see in Nicaragua represent spots where the CIA helped to mine harbors in Nicaragua. You can see fleets off both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of Nicaragua. We have made a habit of keeping those ships. We have surveillance ships on the Pacific side. Right now we have the Iowa, which is the sister ship to the New Jersey, a battleship off the Pacific coast.

You recall the New Jersey, of course, was the ship that was lobbing shells into Lebanon.

And on the Atlantic coast right now we have a guided-missile frigate, as well as several hydrofoil missile boats.

WHOLEY: Let me ask the folks at home to jump into the conversation....

How much money is the United States sinking into Central America?

GOOSE: Well, it's hard to get a total figure. In terms of military aid, you can come up with hard figures. It is a skyrocketing figure. From 1950 through 1981, the United States provided \$245 million in military aid to all of Central America. In the next two years, 1982 and 1983, we exceeded that 31-year total by about \$45 million.

The Reagan Administration has proposed that over the next two years -- that is, 1984-1985 -- we provide over \$600 million. So, it's an exponential increase.

In addition to that, all these construction activities and NATO maneuvers add up to additional hundreds of millions of dollars. So you're talking fairly sizable amounts.

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WHOLEY: Honduras figures in this whole thing rather critically, doesn't it?

GOOSE: Honduras has become the focal point of U.S. military activity in the region. We're doing all of this construction. We can't put too many people into El Salvador because of congressional limitations. So what we've done is increased the number of U.S. military personnel in Honduras from, oh, about two dozen in early 1983 to an average of over 2000 now.

WHOLEY: We have three pictures which we want to put up on the screen right now. And as we take a look at them, could you tell us what we're taking a look at?

GOOSE: This is first one is at Trujillo. This is an example of the housing that we're building there. These are known as CAT houses, Central American tropical houses. We've built enough of these for about 800 troops. They're fairly permanent. Vietnam vets have told me that they're better than what we were building in Southeast Asia. The Administration calls them temporary. We built these during the military exercises, but they could last a good ten years.

This next picture here is at Agua Cate (?), which is near the Nicaraguan border. We constructed an 8000-foot runway at Agua Cate. What we're looking at are concrete culverts there which are used to direct water. They're an indication that these airstrips are not temporary.

This is sort of a before picture at Homistran (?), which is also near the Nicaraguan border. Both Agua Cate and Homistran are about 30 miles from the border, and we've built a 4000-foot airstrip there. All very close.

These airstrips can be used by U.S. military personnel in the future if we do indeed decide to take military action against Nicaragua. They also have been used by the anti-Nicaraguan rebels, the Contras. The Contras, themselves, have acknowledged that Agua Cate, where we have been doing this construction, is a major storage depot and launching pad for their activities.

WHOLEY: At the beginning of our conversation, when we talked about the kind of staff people that work at the Center for Defense Information, you mentioned a lot of retired military people. What do the retired military people feel about all this military activity?

GOOSE: Well, my directors, who are two retired admirals, are extremely concerned. They are more convinced even, I think, than I am that this all adds up to a U.S. master plan to

invade Nicaragua in the future. The Reagan Administration, as I mentioned, is committed to getting rid of leftist-oriented governments in this hemisphere. And they think that all of these military activities, the training, the construction, the increase in personnel, is aimed at this goal.

WHOLEY: Yet the heaviest fighting at this particular time certainly is in El Salvador. In late August of 1984, what's going on in El Salvador? What should we know about it?

GOOSE: Well, the heaviest fighting in Central America certainly is taking place in El Salvador right now, although many people don't realize that the anti-government rebels in Nicaragua now outnumber the rebels in El Salvador. That is, the rebels which we are backing outnumber the rebels in El Salvador.

That is, I think, a sort of secondary purpose of this increased U.S. military activity in the region -- that is, to bolster these authoritarian but anti-Communist governments which are in existence.

WHOLEY: You know, I get an awful lot of mail from folks who watch different interviews that we have on the program, and obviously they are very, very patriotic Americans. They have a very, very strong feeling that whatever President Reagan is up to militarily and what he's up to in his foreign policy, they support it a hundred percent.

How do you begin to suggest to people who hold that point of view that there's anything going on that they should be overly concerned about and that, indeed, a war centering around Nicaragua might come to pass?

GOOSE: Well, I suppose it's according to your perspective. If you think that it's proper for the United States to be engaged in the overthrow of foreign governments, then you could support the activities of the Administration. If you think that you can install democracy and a free enterprise system at the point of a gun, then you can support the kind of activities which the Administration is taking right now. But if you think that the wiser course in the long run is to pursue non-military solutions to the problems of the region, problems which are set in long-term economic and social disparities, and not, as the Administration will lead people to believe, in Cuban- and Soviet-inspired subversion, then you again would have to oppose what the Administration has been doing.

WHOLEY: What do we know about -- what do you know that we might not know about the level of intelligence activities in Central America?

GOOSE: Well, it's very extensive, and it is part of the

increased activity. We haven't talked about one particularly disturbing aspect of our involvement, which is increased direct involvement in the combat activities that are taking place in El Salvador and in Nicaragua. We have just this past week returned to Honduras an intelligence battalion out of Georgia which is flying OV-1 reconnaissance aircraft over El Salvador and providing what they call near-instantaneous battlefield intelligence to Salvadoran government troops on the ground. These reconnaissance vehicles on occasion get shot at.

We are also flying these reconnaissance aircraft out of Panama. And there are other examples that I could give of direct involvement in the combat activity.

WHOLEY: Stephen Goose is our guest, senior research analyst at the Center for Defense Information.

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WHOLEY: You're on Late Night America.

MAN: My name is Dan. I live in Washington, D.C. I'd like to ask my question, and also preface it. My question is: What is the ultimate objective of all that you've explained about Central America and the preparations there for the United States to go to war for the American people? What is the ultimate objective for the American people?

And I'd like to say openly that we are invading Nicaragua and we want to invade Nicaragua in order to have our boys killed. That, I feel, is the way I'd like to preface this. And it's our need -- what's most disturbing is our need to support this atrocious violence against people in Central America.

WHOLEY: Okay. Let's get a comment from Stephen Goose.

GOOSE: Well, as I say, I think the two major objectives of all of this activity are, one, to undermine and eventually overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, and, two, to maintain in power the authoritarian regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala and Honduras.

I cannot agree, however, with your feeling that the Administration wants to kill American boys. I think that a direct invasion, a direct massive U.S. invasion involving a lot of U.S. combat troops is something that the Administration is going to use as a last option. That's why they've been pouring so much money into the Contras. We've spent over \$70 million building up about a 15,000-man force of guerrillas to fight the Sandinista government. They've been unsuccessful so far, which

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is what has me worried that eventually we may go in directly with our own troops. But I think the Administration is going to see it as a last-ditch solution.

WHOLEY: I would want to echo Stephen's thoughts. I don't think that anybody is wanting to get any American soliders killed.

You're on Late Night America.

MAN: This is Mark. I'm calling from Washington state. I have a question. I spent a month and a half off the coast of Central America last summer on a naval vessel, and my big question is like we really didn't do anything. What good are the naval vessels and the Navy as such doing just sitting there doing nothing off the coast?

WHOLEY: What'd they tell you you were there for?

MAN: They didn't.

WHOLEY: They didn't? You just go, huh?

MAN: We just went.

WHOLEY: I guess you go where they tell you to go, huh?

MAN: Always.

WHOLEY: All right.

GOOSE: Well, the Administration has made quite clear that the purpose of keeping naval vessels -- we've had aircraft carrier battle groups and we've had both the New Jersey and now the Iowa off the coast of Nicaragua -- is to intimidate the government of Nicaragua. We also had them there at the time of the El Salvador elections. This is an example of how the Administration is relying on military initiatives to try and deal with the problems in the region.

WHOLEY: Is there any way that the presence of this military hardware, ships, weaponry, whatever, is holding something together in Central America that might be falling apart if they weren't there?

GOOSE: Well, you can certainly make the point that demonstrations of military power can serve to bolster your commitment to your allies. That is, perhaps having these ships there makes the Honduran government feel safer, because the Honduran government has felt threatened by Nicaragua. But even now, it's been going on -- we've had these exercises going on for

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about a year and a half, and it's been quite clear from recent reports that the Honduran government and the Honduran people are getting sick and tired of the extensive U.S. military presence and want us to cut back.

In fact, it's happening in El Salvador also. General Gorman, who is the Commander-in-Chief of Southern Command in Panama, who is responsible for U.S. military activities in Central America, recently went before Congress and suggested that we should increase our advisers in Honduras [sic] to 125 from 55.

Well, two days later the Salvadoran Army Chief of Staff came out and said, "We don't want any more advisers. We want less." They want to run their own war.

WHOLEY: You're on Late Night America.

MAN: I want to know, is biological or chemical warfare going to be used in Central America?

GOOSE: I don't believe so.

WHOLEY: Either one.

GOOSE: Correct.

WHOLEY: You're on Late Night America.

MAN: I get the impression that the CDI isn't too concerned about Communist Cuban and Russian influence in Central America. And if they are, how would they suggest that the United States go about eradicating this very, I think, severe threat to our southern border that could possibly require us to allocate up to 100,000 troops to secure, you know, the Gulf Coast in case of any kind of action.

WHOLEY: Are you worried about Communist presence there?

GOOSE: I'm not worried about it because I don't feel it's a threat to the United States' interests. I would certainly prefer that all of the governments in Central America are oriented towards the United States and not the Soviet Union or not Cuba.

I think what we have to understand, though, given the what is really tragic history of U.S. involvement in the region, that governments in Central America are going to be liberal in the future, maybe even radical. But they don't have to be anti-American and pro-Soviet. We've got to try and work with these governments and not against them.

WHOLEY: But can you see the caller's point of view that

if just left to their own resources, things might start to crumble rather quickly down there and come back to haunt us?

GOOSE: Well, things could happen rather quickly and come back to haunt us whether or not the Soviets had any involvement. And, in fact, probably would and probably will. This is largely because over the course of many, many decades we have contributed to the situation which is -- where you have military-dominated, repressive regimes who have kept the general population very unhappy, in a very impoverished state. You have wealthy elites who dominate the political and economic situation. And you have essentially here a situation where revolution is almost inevitable.

WHOLEY: Let's turn the clock ahead to 1990 and say that in 1984 an election was held, the Democrats were elected, the Democratic Party pulled all of this military might out of Central America, and in 1990 three of the key countries that we were talking back about in 1984 were all similar to Cuba. How would you feel about that?

GOOSE: It would make me very unhappy. Unfortunately...

WHOLEY: But that's what they're arguing, that that's reason that they're there for today.

GOOSE: You can device as undesirable a scenario as you want.

WHOLEY: Yeah, but that's the basis of the President's scenario. Right?

GOOSE: Certainly. I disagree that that would happen. And what I especially disagree with...

WHOLEY: Did it happen in Cuba? It happened in Cuba.

GOOSE: What I especially disagree with is that the proper way to stop that from happening is to militarize the region and to continue to pursue military rather than diplomatic or political initiatives.

WHOLEY: Okay. But you wouldn't want three countries more to be Cubas, would you?

GOOSE: I would not want any more countries to be Cubas.

WHOLEY: Okay. So you say that trying to hold whatever's going on there in check may be the right idea, but to do it militarily is a disaster.

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GOOSE: To do it militarily will probably insure more Cubas.

WHOLEY: That's an interesting point. Follow up on that.

GOOSE: Well, the military activities which we've been undertaking, I believe, are counterproductive in the long run. They are going to alienate the general population of all of the countries of the region. We're putting all of our eggs into the baskets of the dictators who've run these countries for years and years and who the majority of the populations have come to oppose.

WHOLEY: You're on Late Night America.

MAN: Suppose the United States were to invade Nicaragua. How long would such a conflict last? Would it be a Genada-type invasion lasting only a week, or would it be a Vietnam-type war going on for years and years without end?

GOOSE: I think in between those two. I don't think that Nicaragua -- it would certainly not be as easy an operation as Grenada. You could not devise a much easier operation than Grenada, even though we didn't do so well there. It's according to what kind of invasion we tried to institute.

I think that we could relatively quickly, by marshaling massive air and naval power and a few amphibious landings, we could probably very quickly destroy the majority of Nicaragua's air force and naval assets, and we could probably occupy different parts of the country, cut off its economic lifeline. However, that would not mean that Nicaragua would then be in the U.S. camp. I think that essentially what would happen is the Nicaraguan population would rise up against the United States and treat it as a foreign invader, and that we would find ourselves involved in urban and rural warfare over a period of many years.

I don't think it would be quite as bad as Vietnam because Vietnam is a much larger, more difficult country to fight in than Nicaragua.

WHOLEY: You're on Late Night America.

MAN: I'd like to ask Stephen, does the United States have a moral reesponsibility to aid the freedom fighters to defeat the Sandinista government?

GOOSE: No, certainly not. The Sandinistas are not the good guys, but that does not give the United States the right to try and overthrow the foreign government and to support, essentially, what could be viewed as terrorists. We're always talking

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about the terrorists in the Middle East and the terrorists in El Salvador. But you're seeing the exact same kind of activity from the Contras.

WHOLEY: We are out of time. It's a frightening thing, and I don't think it's ever quite happened like this before, that here we are sitting on a television program talking about the possibility of war in and about Nicaragua.

Stephen Goose has been our guest, senior research analyst with the Center for Defense Information.