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4701 WILLARD AVENUE, CHEVY CHASE, MARYLAND 20815 (301) 656-4068

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SUBJECT The War in Nicaragua

BILL MOYERS: Our story now is the debate in Washington over the war in Nicaragua. It's going to be a political issue this fall. Three years ago President Reagan authorized the CIA to start supporting the rebels fighting the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The Sandinistas, you'll recall, had earlier been cheered by virtually every segment of society there for throwing out of power the much-hated regime of the dictator Somoza. But instead of democracy, the Sandinistas copied the Marxist government of Cuba, with its one-party rule. This drove some Nicaraguans who had supported the revolution into the countryside, where, with members of Somoza's old bodyguard, they've been waging guerrilla war against the Sandinistas.

On the grounds that the Sandinistas were sending arms from Nicaragua to leftist guerrillas in nearby El Salvador, President Reagan began CIA support for the rebels. But then he permitted help for more than the interdiction of weapons, and soon the U.S. was subsidizing attacks not only against the Nicaraguan military, but against civilians and their means of livelihood. This has increased the debate in Washington over whether we should be involved at all.

The Sandinista government calls them criminals. President Reagan describes them as freedom fighters. They are the Contras, the counterrevolutionaries of Nicaragua. These are the insurgents the United States has been supporting, Nicaraguan men and women who have been waging a not-so-secret war against their government.

The song they sing is of fighting and sacrifice and of the urgency of saving their country.

The drills start at dawn at base camps in neighboring Honduras or hidden in Nicaragua's own countryside. Some of these people may be former National Guardsmen, the troops of the late dictator Somoza, who was overthrown by Sandinista revolutionaries. Some are simple peasants trying hard to become professional soldiers.

ALFONSO RABELLO: We're fighting for the democratic rescue of the Nicaraguan revolution. We are revolutionaries. We do not accept the name Contras. We are not counterrevolutionaries. We are part of the revolution that has been betrayed.

MOYERS: Alfonso Rabello (?) was once a member of the Sandinista government. Disillusioned with its Marxist policies, he quit to become a rebel leader.

RABELLO: Nicaragua is going around Cuba and Cuba going around the Soviet Union. And we are now more dependent from the Soviet Union in Nicaragua than Nicaragua was dependent from the United States in Somoza time. And there has been a lot of noise being made by the Sandinistas saying, "We want to be independent from Yankee imperialism." But we also want to be independent from Soviet imperialism. If you substitute one by the other, it doesn't do any good to the people.

MOYERS: These soldiers are the enemies of the Contras. They are Sandinistas, supporters of the Nicaraguan government. On a hillside in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas keep watch, guarding their town against a Contra attack. These men are members of the militia, unpaid army volunteers. They stay here 24 hours a day just in case.

The town is Ocotal, a provincial capital with about 20,000 inhabitants. Almost everyone here appears to be armed, even these schoolchildren who patrol the streets. They say they're ready to fight if the rebels attack.

The people here know what to expect. On June 1st of this year several hundred rebels invaded Ocotal, and the streets still bear the scars of battle. Bullet holes riddle the walls of family homes and the local hospital.

ALFONSO MALISPIN: We heard shots coming from the street, people screaming and yelling.

Alfonso Malispin (?) was working at the radio station when it was attacked.

MALISPIN: They poured gas, gasoline on the floor, on the desks, chairs, everything, and they set the whole place on fire. There was an old man sleeping there. They beat him up and

he got shot. At about the same time, there was a kid next-door. He was trying to get out to the street. He was caught. They beat him up, and then he was shot too.

MOYERS: When the rebels left four hours later, 34 people were injured and 14 were dead. Some of the casualties, like this woman's husband, were members of the army or the militia, but seven were civilians.

ANTONIO HARKIN: I believe that the whole responsibility of the war in Nicaragua belongs to the United States.

MOYERS: Antonio Harkin has been Nicaragua's Ambassador to Washington. He is a native of Ocotol.

HARKIN: And that force is a mercenary force, has been organized, trained, financed, and directed by -- directly by the U.S. Administration. We would not have war in Nicaragua without the President Reagan's [unintelligible] policy.

MOYERS: Would there be no rebels fighting your government if it were not for the U.S.?

HARKIN: Certainly not. We will have normal opposition, as any government has, but not a war.

MAN: This is where they kept the basic grain of the basic grains program that they were using...

MOYERS: These American medical workers visited Ocotol to take a look at the damage. They found the granary completely destroyed.

MAN: This was a storage place in the intermediary where they have the grains so that they can get them to the peasants at low cost. You can see what's left of it.

MOYERS: This is all that remains of tall silver silos that housed food for the people. Now, scavengers search for the few remaining bits of grain.

Along with the granary, the Contras destroyed a coffee drying plant, the offices of the electrical company, and the lumber yard, which had been the largest employer in the region.

Ocotol was no isolated target. Elsewhere in Nicaragua, the rebels are attacking in an effort to bring the government to its knees. So far, the estimated damage is over \$200 million.

The economy has been further shaken by U.S. Government attempts to stop the Nicaraguans from getting international loans

to rebuild their country. But a war against the economy has become a war against people.

DR. MERNER CUNNINGHAM: I was captured by a group of Contras and I was taken to a training camp in El Duda (?), and they kept me for 12 hours, more or less. During those 12 hours, I was beaten and I was raped by a lot of the Contras.

MOYERS: Dr. Merner (?) Cunningham is one of nearly 200 health and education workers allegedly tortured, raped or killed by the Contras. Now she's suing the Contras and the U.S. Government for damages.

DR. CUNNINGHAM: They were very proud because they said that they were receiving support from the United States Government, that they had the Americans that were training them and bringing them canned food. They had Camel cigarettes and they were proud because they were smoking Camel cigarettes. And that made them feel very sure that they were going to win, they said, the war against the Sandinistas.

MOYERS: Although military analysts say it's doubtful these Contras could actually win the war, their numbers have been growing. Three years ago there were about 1500 rebels. Today, an estimated 15,000. They have received from the United States about \$100 million, funneled through the CIA. The Contra war, as it's known, is the largest, best publicized, and most controversial CIA operation since Vietnam.

RABELLO: A lot of journalists and a lot of American journalists ask me, "Well, we have proof that you have received money from the CIA." Like if this was something criminal.

I sometimes feel very tempted to say, "Look, if you feel the CIA is a criminal, corrupt organization, why don't you Americans write to your congressmen and ask for a bill that would cancel the CIA? Because you feel so ashamed of the CIA, you should cancel it."

And to me, it doesn't make sense, really. There is a complex about the CIA.

I see CIA money as clean money because it's the money of the American taxpayer. I have no objection for it.

MOYERS: That money hasn't reached some of the rebels because it comes with strings attached. More than one faction of Contras are fighting in different parts of Nicaragua, and the CIA has been pressuring them to unite. The price for not uniting is a cutoff in funds.

These men say they haven't received any money for five months because they refused to join with the extreme right-wing forces supported by the United States. So they sit in their camps by the river, unable to fight and barely able to feed their troops.

MAN: We need everything. We need food, goods, clothes, arms, everything. The main thing we need here is the real support of the democratic governments. We need help.

MOYERS: In Washington, more help for the Contras has been a long-running controversy between President Reagan and CIA Director William Casey, on the one side, and the Democratic leaders of Congress, on the other.

In years past, the White House could order covert CIA actions without telling Congress. Then both the House and the Senate demanded to be kept fully and currently informed of all major CIA activities.

The House Intelligence Committee has tried to monitor the Administration's secret war. At first, it had little quarrel with the President's request. Republican member Bill Young of Florida, a Reagan supporter, remembers.

REP. BILL YOUNG: The committee agreed that we would support the Contra forces; that while we would not be attempting to overthrow the government of Nicaragua, the Sandinistas, we would be allowed to actually go into Nicaragua to attack targets that would be considered military or that would be considered supportive of their military, and it would be done for the purpose of keeping them busy at home so that they wouldn't have the time or the resources to bother the people of El Salvador.

MOYERS: And in your judgment, what you were told then has been done, and there's been no exceeding what you had been told.

REP. YOUNG: To be honest with you, there may have been some excesses in several areas. Economic targets have been hit, when we had intended that they not be hit.

MOYERS: As the war expanded, some members of the House Intelligence Committee accused the Administration of failing to inform them of the CIA activities, and they tried to limit funds for the war.

A leading spokesman against Reagan's policy, Congressman Wyche Fowler, Democrat of Georgia.

Is it true that the Administration tried to sell the covert war in the beginning by saying that only four or five

hundred Contras would be involved, four men on a patrol trying to interdict arms?

REP. FOWLER: That is true. They sold it as an arms interdiction program with minimum risk to the participants.

MOYERS: Have you seen evidence that arms were interdicted?

REP. FOWLER: Well, I think that weapons have been captured. But they are, honestly, few and far between.

Well, there's just simply no question that the Administration, in setting its policy, chose the CIA as the instrument to carry out a paramilitary operation against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. And when we found that the army continued to grow and grow beyond any expectations or any reporting by the Administration, that is when the Intelligence Committee went to the United States Congress and said, "We've got to stop this."

MOYERS: But they couldn't stop it. While the House tried to cut off funds for the war, the Senate pressed to continue the money, and the Contras went on to attack Corinto, Nicaragua's largest port. In a predawn strike, they blew up fuel storage tanks, turning most of the country's oil reserves into flames.

Months later, the CIA directed mines to be placed in the same harbor and two others, an act condemned around the world, even by America's allies.

The House voted again: no more money for the Contras.

REP. FOWLER: We on the Intelligence Committee have done everything we could, through the parameters of legislation, a couple of thousand miles away in Washington, to limit the objectives of the Contras and to make sure that any damage to the economy, civilian targets was kept to a minimum, if at all. But the truth of the matter is, we're all kidding ourselves if we think when you arm people down there and all of a sudden they grow and grow and grow and take on a life of their own and leadership of their own and objectives of their own, that this kind of thing is not going to happen.

MOYERS: What do you think we've accomplished, Congressman Young, in the last three years of this war?

REP. YOUNG: We've kept El Salvador from falling behind the Western Hemisphere's Iron Curtain. No question in my mind, El Salvador would have fallen, Guatemala would have fallen, and I

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believe that Honduras would have fallen also by now. I think it was that critical at the time.

REP. FOWLER: We are the one that are thrusting the flag back to the Sandinistas and rallying that country, regardless of the Nicaraguan citizen differences with the Sandinista regime, causing them, in patriotic fervor, to rally against the invading army of the United States, forcing them for more help from the Soviet Union, forcing them to Europe and asking even our allies to help resist these Contras that the United States is financing.

MOYERS: So we were achieving exactly what we didn't want to accomplish.

REP. FOWLER: And the result, in my opinion, especially after three or four years, is that we have achieved precisely opposite of what we set out to do in Central America.

MOYERS: It's easier to start a war than to stop it. These Contras still have plenty of ammunition, enough to last five months, they say. But what happens then? If Congress cuts off all the money and they're left defenseless in the countryside of Nicaragua, they're not likely to find mercy from the Sandinistas. More likely, most of the Contras would end up in refugee camps, like this one in neighboring Honduras. Already, more than 80,000 Nicaraguans have fled their homeland for safer ground.

These people are the families and relatives of the Contra forces. There are no jobs for them in Honduras, so they spend their days listening to rebel broadcasts about the progress of the war. They hope the Contras will win and they can go home again.

Do you think that if the present policies toward Nicaragua continue, there will be more war?

HARKIN: I have no doubt that [if] the current policy continues, the United States eventually will intervene directly in Central America and it will start a new type of Vietnam in the heart of the American hemisphere.

MOYERS: What chance would Nicaragua have if the United States invaded?

HARKIN: We are fighting in Nicaragua for an idea. Ideas are stronger than armies. We are a small nation. We are militarily weak, economically weak. But morally, we are very strong. We're strong enough to defend our country. It doesn't matter how high will be the price we will have to pay.

REP. FOWLER: You know, if you conquer a country, you've

got to keep conquering it. And I just don't see that there is a possible lasting military solution. So, even if the Administration's policy was wildly successful and we somehow chased the Sandinistas, where would they go? If they went back to the hills and mountains of Nicaragua where they fought Somoza for ten years, what would we have accomplished? We would have promoted in Nicaragua what we now have in El Salvador, a bloody civil war.

MOYERS: The Sandinista army on parade. Its power continues to grow. Most able-bodied young men have been drafted in the campaign to stop the Contra rebels. Women and children are encouraged to volunteer.

But the fate of their war, the future of the Sandinistas and the Contras they're fighting depends on what happens in Washington. The President wants to continue this not-so-secret war. But Congress is divided.

It is by now a familiar American predicament. If we abandon the rebels, to whom we've given encouragement, arms and money, they will be left high and dry. It happened in Vietnam, Cambodia, Iran, and Lebanon. Those we asked to bet on us bet on the losing side. But if we continue to support the Contras and they continue to war on the economy and civilians of Nicaragua, then we will be subsidizing violence against people who happen to be living in the wrong place at the wrong time, who have done us no harm.