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Shultz adds velvet glove to Central America policy

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Now that he has made his mark on Middle East and European policy, Secretary of State George P. Shultz is being credited by some with transforming Central American policy.

Not so, say State Department officials. What Mr. Shultz has changed is the administration's tone and rhetoric. When it comes to substance, they say, it's steady as she goes.

Conservative critics fear, however, that Shultz might be veering dangerously in the direction of accommodation with the guerrilla forces in El Salvador. Liberal critics fear that the US may be escalating a secret, paramilitary war of harassment against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua.

But interviews with State Department officials and evidence from Central America itself indicate that Shultz is sticking pretty close to the policy he inherited: no major escalation, but steady, consistent support for anticommunist regimes and for economic and political reforms. The US encourages offers to negotiate an end to the fighting in El Salvador, but only within the framework of the elections system which the Americans

helped to establish there.

Reagan administration strategists believe that a sudden dramatic shift toward either negotiation or military victory is not likely in El Salvador. They argue that steady pressure on the guerrillas may in the long run enable the anticommunist forces to prevail.

Shultz has helped to keep the region out of the headlines, meanwhile, by cooling the rhetoric. His predecessor, Alexander M. Haig Jr., often spoke in dramatic terms about Central America. Mr. Haig argued for going "to the source" of the trouble: Cuba. His statements sometimes seemed to do more to create anxiety about administration policy than they did to create support.

Shultz's low-key approach notwithstanding, events have forced Central America back into the headlines. A Newsweek magazine cover story on the United States' "secret war" against Nicaragua exaggerated the magnitude of CIA support for opponents of the Nicaraguan regime, officials say. But the story has embarrassed the administration and caused new misgivings among critics in Congress.

In El Salvador, lack of progress in bringing right-wing assassins to justice, including those who killed several Americans, prompted the American ambassador, Deane R. Hinton, to protest publicly against weaknesses in the Salvadoran system. This, added to a speech last August by a top US official who spoke of the need for a process of reconciliation among Central American combatants, has led some to see a change of direction under Shultz toward support for a negotiated settlement in El Salvador.

But the State Department sees little chance that negotiations with guerrilla representatives will produce the desired results.

In his Oct. 29 speech criticizing the Salvadoran criminal justice system, the ambassador also contended that although it has taken 4,000 casualties over the past 15 months, El Salvador's Army is "slowly but surely winning the war." If that is the case, negotiations might not be necessary.

A highly placed State Department official said the Salvadoran guerrilla groups viewed negotiations as a "tactic" and that Cuban and Nicaraguan support for the guerrillas was unrelenting. He said that while the flow of arms from Nicaragua to El Salvador by way of Honduras had been blocked to a degree, there had been an increase in arms going by way of the sea and air. According to some reports, the official said, helicopters were being used to carry some of the weapons.

"The Nicaraguans see El Salvador as the inevitable outgrowth of their revolution and consider it their inalienable right to get involved there," said the State Department official. "In their view, you best preserve the revolution by exporting it."

The official spoke in an interview on the understanding that he not be quoted by name. He declined to comment on the Newsweek cover story which charged that the Reagan administration is behind a major "covert campaign" to arm, train, and direct Nicaraguan exiles in an effort to "destabilize" the Sandinista government.

Other officials indicated that whatever was going on fell far short of an attempt to topple the Sandinistas. They indicated that the true version of events was contained in a less dramatic story in the New York Times on Nov. 2, which said that the US was supporting small-scale secret military operations against Nicaragua intended to harass, but not to overthrow, the Nicaraguan government.

Whatever the scope of these operations may be, publicity about them may make it more difficult for the administration to get support for its ever more costly Central America policy from the US Congress. In addition to supplying military trainers and more than \$230 million in economic aid this year to El Salvador, the administration has upped its commitments to Honduras. It is edging toward a renewal of military aid to Guatemala, and it wants to increase its support for Costa Rica, which it sees as the target of a "destabilization" campaign by Cuba and Nicaragua.

In a rare compliment to the administration, Rep. Michael D. Barnes, a Democrat from Maryland who is chairman of the House subcommittee on inter-American affairs, said he thought the administration's Central America policy was "becoming more sophisticated."

In Mr. Barnes's view, this was apparent in the public criticisms of the Salvadoran judicial system made by Ambassador Hinton and in the administration's calls for a process of reconciliation among Central America's combatants aimed at substituting political competition for armed competition. He welcomed what he described as a new "tone of moderation" in the administration.

But at the same time, Barnes says he sees grave dangers in the reports of American-sponsored covert action against Nicaragua.

In the end, the congressman said, covert action might have a boomerang effect and "destabilize" the very governments — in Honduras and Costa Rica, for example — it was meant to defend.

"I think the new Congress will be a little bit tougher with the administration on Central American issues," said Barnes in a telephone interview with the Monitor. "If you look at the list of incoming members, they are substantially more progressive than the group which they replaced."