

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-3

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Congress Doesn't Want to Wash Our Dirty Little War in Public

Last week, Rep. Edward P. Boland (D-Mass.), chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, promised to give the "dirty little war" in Nicaragua his personal attention.

"I can say that the committee certainly does understand its obligations to rein in activities which can get out of control or which could threaten to involve this nation or its allies in a war," he told his colleagues.

That was enough for the House. It passed by 411 to 0 a Boland amendment that prohibits the CIA or the Defense Department from using taxpayers' money "for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua or provoking a military exchange between Nicaragua and Honduras."

But it is a year since The Washington Post disclosed a \$19 million administration plan to subvert the Marxist government of Nicaragua. In all that time, Reagan officials, including the president, never have denied the plan or its purpose and have kissed off all queries about it.

If the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence was exercising its watch-

dog function, we have no evidence of it. Under the "reform" of the intelligence oversight system on Capitol Hill, the CIA reports only to two select committees, whose members promise not to tell anyone what they have discovered about covert operations. They can't even say that CIA Director William J. Casey went before them to testify on Nicaragua the other day.

It was for that reason that Rep. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), a liberal leader in the House, introduced an amendment that forbade the CIA and Defense from carrying out any "military activities in or against Nicaragua."

Unlike the Boland amendment, which only prohibited the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government, not all military activities, Harkin's amendment had little support. It's dicey to be seen as defending a communist regime, even against illegal U.S. activity.

What we are doing in and to Nicaragua we learn from the press.

Newsweek had a cover story called "America's Secret War," in which our ambassador to Honduras, John Negroponte, is depicted as the generalissimo of the counterrevolution that keeps the government of neighboring Nicaragua in a constant state of nerves and military alertness. Negroponte, according to Newsweek, deals directly with the commander of Honduras' armed forces, Gen. Gustavo Alvarez.

The CIA, says Time magazine, now has 200 agents in Honduras organizing followers of Nicaragua's despised former dictator, Anastasio Somoza, for border raids, bridge bombings, kidnappings, village burnings and other exercises that the Reagan administration condemns when other countries engage in them.

Supposedly the Boland amendment was acceptable because it protects the CIA's cover story, which is that its goal is to interdict the flow of arms from Nicaragua to the rebels of El Salvador. That requires "military activity."

If Boland's intelligence committee in the past year tried to "rein in" the operation, it has failed. The press reports stepped-up violence in the area. Did Boland ever wonder if the situation was getting out of control—something he now promises us his committee will not permit to happen?

We don't know. He and his fellow committee members break their own rules if they tell. They are sworn to secrecy about the secrets they hear. They cannot share information—and doubts—with their colleagues. If they succeed in shutting down the dirty little war, we won't even know that.

The Somocistas boast to reporters of their imminent invasion of Nicaragua, and the bloodbath that will follow. Does the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence ask the CIA about things like that?

Possibly, we will learn something about what is going on in court. Seven Nicaraguans who claim to be victims of U.S. policy have brought suit against the Reagan administration. Among them is Dr. Myrna Cunningham, a half-Indian Ni-

caraguan health official who says she was kidnaped and raped a year ago by Miskito Indians, trained as counterrevolutionaries by U.S.-backed Somocista guardsmen.

Three British members of Parliament, who recently concluded a tour of Central America, came through Washington this week to tell the administration as "candid friends" what a mistake it is to write off the government in Nicaragua, which despite its flaws is addressing the concerns of the people.

When they called on J. William Middendorf II, the U.S. representative to the Organization of American States, Stanley Clinton-Davis, a Labor MP, asked him directly if U.S. policy is to overthrow the Nicaraguan regime. Middendorf replied, according to the Englishmen, that "personally" he would be delighted to see it happen—although, he added, it is not government policy. Middendorf, through a press aide, denies the statement.

Most people think that overthrow is the Reagan policy. With a stonewalling administration and a gagged oversight committee, it's hard to find out—and even harder to stop.

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