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Castro's covert gamble

Career professionals in the State Department and in the intelligence agencies, who have no political axes to grind, are becoming increasingly concerned that Fidel Castro is planning to exploit the foreign-policy differences toward Central America that divide Democrats and Republicans in this presidential election year.

After the brief flowering last spring of a bipartisan foreign-policy consensus in the Kissinger Commission's report, the Democratic convention launched a sweeping attack on President Reagan's alleged militarization of policy, demanded an end to all support to the contras fighting in Nicaragua and was equivocal about future military aid to President Jose Napoleon Duarte's newly elected government in El Salvador.

Always aware of vulnerabilities within the American body politic and quick to take advantage of them, Castro has moved astutely on three fronts. Flattering the Democratic hopes for peaceful diplomacy, Castro was conciliatory in his recent speech on the 31st anniversary of the Cuban revolution and promised that negotiations could lead to "reducing tensions in our area and internationally."

In contrast to this soft talk for foreign consumption, Castro in his home-front propaganda has rallied flagging enthusiasm with calls for emergency training measures to deal with the danger of a U.S. attack. Exercises have been conducted on how to cope with an American occupying force, and Cuban army veterans have had to report on Sundays for special training, as if invasion were imminent.

But it is on the third front of clandestine political and para-military action that Castro has moved most boldly to exploit Democratic opposition to crucial elements of the Reagan strategy. Responding to the growing probability that the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives will succeed in blocking all U.S. aid to the contras in their fight against the Sandinista regime, Castro has reacted typically by increasing his covert intervention in El Salvador.

According to U.S. career officials, there is hard, convincing evidence from secret sources that Castro has personally intervened to persuade the Marxist leaders of the Salvadoran guerrillas to launch a major offensive this September against President Duarte's new government before it can consolidate itself. The Cuban leader reportedly has promised to supply

through Nicaragua the additional logistical support needed for the Salvadoran guerrillas to regain the initiative.

The Democratically engineered defeat of any U.S. aid to the contras will give Castro two important advantages. Cut off from American supply lines, the newly unified leadership of the 10,000 anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua will have difficulty continuing more than a token action. Relieved of the necessity of defending their border regions from heavy rebel attack, the Sandinista army and its Cuban advisers will be able to devote full time and attention to infiltration of supplies to the Salvadoran guerrillas.

Reagan officials also fear that, relieved of most of their defensive duties, thousands of trained, Spanish-speaking Sandinista army regulars can be disguised as Salvadoran guerrillas and infiltrated into El Salvador to turn the tide of battle this fall. As long as they were well-supplied, the contras served to keep

the Sandinista army tied down inside Nicaragua.

Another facet of Democratic opposition to the Reagan administration's strategy explains the urgency of Castro's demand for a September offensive. Although the prospects for congressional approval of substantial economic and military aid to El Salvador in

fiscal 1985 have improved as the result of Mr. Duarte's successful lobbying effort, the House Democratic majority seems dug in against the administration's request for \$116 million in emergency military assistance now.

If this aid is denied or sharply reduced, the Salvadoran army will face the September guerrilla offensive without the additional helicopters and ground transportation it has been promised and desperately needs. All the more reason, therefore, for Castro to gamble on this window of vulnerability and to present the Reagan administration with a deteriorating security situation in El Salvador as the date of the U.S. presidential election approaches.

Before the Democratic candidates welcome this unfolding scenario as helpful to their election chances, they have to consider a sitting president's considerable ability to shape events and dominate the news. For example, President Reagan could well decide to risk exposure of intelligence sources in order to reveal the detailed nature of our knowledge of Castro's intentions.

Simultaneously, Mr. Reagan could call both houses of Congress into emergency session before the election to vote up or down on additional emergency assistance to El Salvador. Playing into Castro's hand is no way to win an American election.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.