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Democratic senators in CIA report on Caribbean

By Robert Parry
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WASHINGTON — Three Senate Democrats have complained to CIA Director William J. Casey that a CIA briefing they received about the Caribbean "seriously violated" the agency's obligation to provide them with objective analysis.

The three — Paul E. Tsongas of Massachusetts, Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island and Christopher J. Dodd of Connecticut — wrote Casey that the closed briefing "evidenced a rhetorical tone and selective use of information that bordered on policy prescription."

The complaint, considered virtually unprecedented in Congress' dealings with the CIA, could revive criticism that the Reagan administration has politicized the spy agency by bringing in ideological conservatives to fill sensitive positions.

The briefing on the military situation in Central America and the Caribbean was given Dec. 10 to members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Constantine Menges, the CIA's national intelligence officer for Latin America.

The senators' letter to Casey was dated Dec. 11 and was obtained this week by the Associated Press.

At the session, Sen. Jesse Helms (R., N.C.), a committee member, praised Menges' testimony as "one of the best presentations I've heard. It wasn't an attempt to brainwash any senator."

Menges, considered a conservative theoretician, joined the CIA in September after working as a consultant for the Hudson Institute, a conservative research and policy center.

In an article in the August issue of Commentary magazine, Menges blamed Cuba for fomenting terrorism and revolution in Central America, an argument that parallels administration charges contained in a recent 37-page report on Cuba.

Congressional sources, who declined to be named, said the purpose of Menges' briefing was to present supporting evidence for those charges and to assess U.S. military and political options in Central America.

Instead, one Democratic source said, Menges gave a policy statement that traced all the problems to Havana and yet offered scant evidence to support the charges.

Upset with the briefing, Tsongas told Menges he considered the presentation "an insult" and left the meeting, according to sources who asked not to be identified.

Tsongas declined to discuss the briefing. Pell, Dodd and Menges did not return telephone calls to their offices asking for comment. The CIA also refused to discuss the letter.

Helms, a leading Senate conservative, said Menges was stating not just his own or the CIA's views, but also the conclusions of other U.S. intelligence agencies.

"The problem for these senators was that they were hearing things they didn't want to hear about the Communist takeover in this hemisphere," said Helms, chairman of the Foreign Relations subcommittee on Latin America.

Menges' briefing came amid new administration warnings that it is weighing military options against Cuba and the revolutionary Nicaraguan government.

Administration officials have accused Cuba of inspiring and supporting leftist insurrections in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala and

of planning a Honduras.

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Central America have developed because of severe poverty and political repression carried out by military-dominated governments with U.S. acquiescence.

One Democratic source said Menges' briefing reflected the administration's "politicizing of the premier element of the intelligence community" — the CIA.

In the Dec. 11 letter, the Democratic senators cited the importance of the CIA's "professional, impartial and balanced approach to highly controversial and sensitive issues. These vigorous standards insure the separation of intelligence assessment from foreign policy advocacy.

"In our judgment, Dr. Menges' spoken presentation seriously violated the agency's long-cherished principles and standards" of objectivity and professionalism.

"We firmly believe that Dr. Menges' performance undermines his credibility as a national intelligence officer and calls into question his future effectiveness."

The letter asked Casey to review Menges' testimony and inform the senators on any CIA action regarding Menges.