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WASHINGTON POST
8 MAY 1983

U.S.-Backed Nicaraguan Army Swells to 7,000

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In December, 1981, the CIA informed congressional oversight committees that it had begun building a highly trained commando force of 500 Latins to strike at targets in Nicaragua. Sixteen months later, this force has swelled to an army of 7,000 Nicaraguan men with ambitious political goals and uncertain U.S. control.

Members of the House and Senate Intelligence committees said in interviews that growing concern about the size of this CIA-supported army, its objectives and the question of control over it were major factors in their decisions last week to put brakes on the "secret war" in Central America.

Information now available from a variety of sources, viewed with the benefit of hindsight, raises questions about the candor of the CIA briefings for members of the Intelligence committees. Nevertheless, most of the lawmakers interviewed said they still believe they were informed accurately about details of the operation at every step.

The central problem for many of them, they said, was the growing contradiction between the limited objectives

that Reagan administration officials stated for the covert operation in a dozen secret briefings on Capitol Hill and the ceaseless, sometimes startling growth of the insurgent force and the shifting focus of its activity from one month to the next.

"There is no question that the numbers increased far beyond what the committee anticipated," said Rep. William F. Goodling (R-Pa.). "I think as the force increases and diversifies, controlling it would be an impossibility."

Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.) said, "The committee kept track of it pretty well, but it got out of hand." Once this happened, he said, "there were great restraints on the capability of the committee to turn it around."

"What was particularly difficult for Congress," said Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.), "was that the definition kept changing of what the objectives were, and when the president proclaimed these people to be 'freedom fighters' there was an unmistakable sense that we were not fully apprised of the purposes."

Initially, administration officials characterized the missions of the secret army as the interdiction of arms traffic through Nicaragua to leftist rebels in El Salvador and the

exertion of pressure to force the leftist Sandinista leadership of Nicaragua to "look inward" rather than exporting revolution, according to participants in the congressional briefings. Additional objectives, added months later, were to pressure the Sandinistas to be more democratic and to go to the negotiating table.

Despite President Reagan's reference last Wednesday to the CIA-supported anti-Sandinista guerrillas as "freedom fighters," his administration did not suggest in briefings for Congress that the secret army's real purpose was to bring down the Nicaraguan government.

Increasingly, though, the very size of the secret army, the intensity of its attacks inside Nicaragua and explicit statements by its leaders appeared to outpace the limited purposes outlined to Congress.

By the administration's figures, the 7,000 U.S.-backed Nicaraguan guerrillas now outnumber the 6,000 communist-backed guerrillas whose threat to the government of nearby El Salvador was the original justification for the CIA effort. In meetings with congressmen and senators, CIA Director William J. Casey has refused to set any limit on the ultimate size of the force, made up of Nicaraguan exiles of various factions and native Miskito Indians.

In the last week, the House Intelligence Committee voted to ban covert actions in Nicaragua, the Senate committee voted to permit continuation of the actions for a limited time subject to legislative approval, and Reagan stepped up his appeals for public support of the Nicaraguan insurgents.

Taken together, these events represent the most serious struggle between the executive branch and the congressional committees overseeing the intelligence agencies since the committees were established as permanent arms of the two houses in 1976 and 1977.

The congressional oversight machinery was created to establish, under law, the authority of the legislative branch of an open and democratic government to monitor executive activities that are secret, sensitive and have the potential for major international repercussions. As pioneers in an area where the legislative bodies of most other nations do not tread, the congressional committees operate in a twilight zone, where both sides are still feeling their way.

Unless a consensus can be formed in the coming weeks and months, the struggle over undercover action in Central America could bring about an even more serious crisis between Congress and the Reagan White House. Should the administration persist in backing the insurgents, against increasingly explicit opposition in Congress, the stage would be set for a battle of constitutional proportions involving war and peace, and the power to