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Latin-policy infighting reflects deep divisions

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan may insist that there are no plans to deploy U.S. combat forces in Central America, but at the same time an Army general is proposing covert use of U.S. warplanes to strafe Salvadoran guerrillas.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz arranges a surprise June 1 visit to Nicaragua, but he hides his plans from other high-level administration officials, reportedly out of fear that they would veto the initiative.

Seen from afar, these discrepancies and myriad others like them have given Reagan policies toward Central America a tinge of the sinister, hinting at a "secret agenda" that talks of peace but girds for war.

But up close, the disharmony shows up clearly for what it is: fallout from an unremitting struggle between "moderates" and "hard-liners" within the administration, each side prescribing substantially different policies for Central America's ills.

A detailed examination of administration policy shows that it is mainly the result of day-to-day debate, infighting and lobbying by strong-willed officials throughout the government, rather than a reflection of a detailed plan set down in the Oval Office.

This picture emerged from dozens of interviews with current and former government officials, many of whom refused to be identified, and many with vested interests. To many of those officials, the situation is so murky that they are not certain exactly where U.S. policy is heading.

For instance, one official who has been privy to inside information at the top levels of the administration said: "If Reagan had to make a decision today on whether to go in with troops, I think he'd be against it."

"After the elections, I don't know." Moderates like Shultz agree that the administration must squeeze Nicaragua's Sandinista government and El Salvador's leftist rebels to force them to sue for peace. But they argue that the United States need not send combat forces to the region.

Hard-liners like Undersecretary of Defense Fred C. Ikle contend that the

Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the Salvadoran rebels are a "cancer" that must be cured, through pressure if possible, through direct military intervention if necessary.

Occasionally the hard-liners prevail, and war fever mounts. Occasionally the moderates get their way, and peace seems within grasp. More often, the two sides compromise.

"There are two souls in this administration, and two definitive positions on virtually all foreign and defense policy issues," said a senior State Department official. "Neither school has a dominant position."

Washington veterans say the clashes over Central America are the worst in years.

Much of the infighting stems from the anticommunist philosophy that Reagan brought to government when he took office in 1981.

In Reagan's first 13 months, the State Department fired, sent to far-away posts or forced into early retirement at least seven Latin American experts that the new administration saw as tainted by involvement in President Jimmy Carter's human rights policies and by the "loss" of Nicaragua in the Sandinista revolution in 1979.

Moved out were William Bowdler, an assistant secretary of state; James Cheek and John Bushnell, his deputy assistant secretaries; Robert White, ambassador to El Salvador; Lawrence Pezzullo, ambassador to Nicaragua; Jack Binns, ambassador to Honduras, and Wayne Smith, head of the U.S. Interests Section in Cuba.

Their replacements had little experience in the region, but they shared several traits: conservative ideology; military or intelligence backgrounds; Vietnam experience, and a preference for the nuts-and-bolts of policy rather than the grand design.

First among them was Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr., the retired Army general who urged Reagan only two days after his inauguration to put Central America "on the front burner" and "go to the source" of the region's turmoil — Cuba.

Haig, in his book *Caveat*, said his ideas drew a nod from Reagan but no immediate response. White House chief of staff James A. Baker 3d was unequivocal, however, vetoing the proposals on the ground that Central

America was a "sideshow ... that diverted attention from more important matters such as the economy."

Since then, Baker has been urging moderation because of the concern by top Reagan political aides that the President is perceived by too many voters as trigger-happy.

This was Haig's first experience with what he described as "the constant bugaboo of the administration's foreign policy" — a president who kept his distance from the issues and gave way to "divided councils, different voices." These would become the enduring characteristics of the Central America debate.

Though Reagan in the early days was not ready to make Central America an administration priority, his policy makers needed something to mollify the hard-line conservatives who had enthusiastically backed his campaign.

"Haig tried to appease U.S. conservatives by throwing them a bone — Central America," said John Carbaugh, then an aide to conservative Sen. Jesse Helms (R., N.C.) and now a Washington lawyer with close ties to administration hard-liners.

The administration chose Thomas O. Enders as its assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs. He had no experience in Latin America, though he was widely regarded as a brilliant diplomat.

His credentials as a hard-liner were impeccable. As the number-two official in the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh from 1971 to 1974, he directed the secret U.S. bombing of Cambodia.

Both administration hard-liners and moderates were initially satisfied with Enders. U.S. military aid to El Salvador soared while pressures eased for agrarian and human rights reform. In Nicaragua, a "carrot and stick" policy sought peace talks with the Sandinistas while the CIA financed anti-Sandinista guerrillas.

Enders was finally dismissed in early 1983, after he proposed negotiations with the Salvadoran rebels and endorsed the regional peace drive undertaken by the Contadora Group — Mexico, Venezuela, Panama and Colombia. His "carrot" and "stick," which had evolved into the well-known "two-track" policy of negotia-