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ANGOLA BILL FUELS NEW DEBATE OVER U.S. COVERT ACTION
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Legislation designed to force public votes in Congress on U.S. aid for Angolan rebels has fueled new debate over President Reagan's use of covert action -- paramilitary operations -- against foreign governments.

While few experts propose an end to all covert action as a U.S. foreign policy tool, some contend it should be employed more sparingly and that there be maximum open debate on decisions to intervene in other countries -- especially when a decision, such as on rebels in Angola, is controversial.

"Few foreign policy decisions are equal in importance to a decision to go to war or to support a war," said Rep. Lee Hamilton, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, who sponsored the Angola bill.

"The extreme complexity of the modern world, the growth of America's responsibilities and the ambiguous nature of many international causes all demand that Congress and the president pool their judgments on these questions," the Indiana Democrat told the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Reagan, according to many analysts and published reports, has vastly expanded covert actions during his five years in office in his personal crusade -- called the "Reagan Doctrine" -- to bolster anti-Communist insurgencies around the world, particularly in Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Cambodia and Angola.

Jay Peterzell, in his 1984 book "Reagan's Secret Wars," said the president made "far-reaching changes in U.S. covert action policy, increasing the use of such operations and severely limiting the role in reviewing them by officials outside the intelligence community."

Peterzell, who works for the American Civil Liberties Union's Center for Naudies, added: "The changes reflect an apparent consensus within the administration that covert action should be a routine rather than an exceptional instrument in American foreign relations."

It is generally believed U.S. covert operations declined after a committee headed by the late Sen. Frank Church in 1975 held rare public hearings and spurred changes in the congressional oversight process.

The Reagan administration and many U.S. officials formally refuse to disclose details of most current U.S. operations.

But many of the facts have leaked out through a variety of sources, including the White House, Congress, rebels and private analysts.

"There is a dilemma in trying to conduct any secret activity in American government because of the tendency to ask questions and debate at the top of our voices," former Central Intelligence Agency Director William Colby told Reuters. "Years ago, one didn't even ask" about covert actions. "Now newsmen go at it full tilt."

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The result has been a curious hybrid, often called an "overt-covert" program, that has the effect of ensuring the public knows the United States is doing "something" for these myriad guerrilla forces, but keeping most details secret and denying Congress a role in the decision-making process.

A Senate intelligence source said the "overt-covert" tactic is useful because it allows Washington and governments assisting Washington officially to deny knowledge of U.S. paramilitary operations.

Morton Halperin, a former deputy assistant secretary for defense, contends that defining interventionist activity as covert is a clever way for a president to avoid public debate and scrutiny.

"Often they remain secret long enough for the United States to get involved, then the argument becomes that we can't abandon our friends in the field," he told Reuters.

The debate over U.S. support for the so-called contra rebels trying to topple Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government has been the most divisive of Reagan's covert exploits.

Polls show a majority of Americans oppose such aid and this resistance has been reflected in Congress.

With attention centering now on Reagan's request for $100 million in mostly military aid for the contras, what was once an entirely covert operation has been forced by circumstance and politics almost entirely into the open.

The request, however, is bogged down in Congress and will not be resolved at least until June.

Meanwhile, a new fight is brewing over Reagan's decision to send $15 million in covert military aid -- including highly-portable Stinger anti-aircraft missiles -- to the UNITA forces of Jonas Savimbi in Angola.

Hamilton's bill, which passed the House Foreign Affairs Committee and is waiting action by the full House, does not directly bar U.S. aid to UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola).

But it would mandate that aid cannot be given until Reagan publicly declares that support for UNITA is important to U.S. national security and Congress concurs.

Hamilton told his colleagues that aiding UNITA represented a significant policy change and should be openly debated and voted by Congress "so that ultimately it can be sustained" by popular consensus.

U.S. aid was halted a decade ago after disclosures the CIA funded UNITA and another pro-Western group in a three-sided civil war following Angola's independence from Portugal.

Many lawmakers, including Hamilton, oppose renewed aid, fearing it would align Washington with South Africa and destroy efforts to reach a negotiated settlement to conflict in southern Africa.

More compelling, some say, is the dichotomy of an administration that insists the program be treated as "covert" while Reagan and other top officials publicly endorse support for the rebels and welcome Savimbi at high-visibilty White House ceremony.