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CIA Exceeded Authority With Salvadoran Aid

Scarcely 14 years after the CIA meddled in Chile's national election and was properly scolded by Congress for its bizarre plottings, the CIA again has intervened in the politics of a sovereign nation.

The story behind the CIA's machinations in El Salvador have been hushed up. But here are the details, which my associate Dale Van Atta has pieced together from intelligence sources:

- In 1981, President Reagan approved a covert action "finding"—the secret routine that authorizes CIA funds for clandestine operations. This allowed the CIA to finance non-communist candidates in Latin American elections. The intent was to block communist sympathizers from coming to power, not to discriminate between rival anti-communist candidates.

- Without further White House authorization, the CIA slipped a reported \$960,000 to El Salvador's Christian Democratic Party, whose candidate, Jose Napoleon Duarte, won the presidential runoff on May 6, 1984. Also, \$437,000 was delivered to the moderate National Conciliation Party. The purpose was to defeat Roberto D'Aubuisson, the

right-wing candidate, who allegedly is linked to the notorious "death squads."

- President Reagan didn't learn about the CIA's meddling in the Salvadoran election until after the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence was briefed May 3 about the secret payments. Five days later, Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) went public with the charge that the CIA had "bought the election" for Duarte.

Press accounts reported that the president summoned Helms to the White House for a reprimand. Our sources say that Reagan was furious, not at Helms but at the CIA. He thanked Helms for saving him from the embarrassment of hailing the election in his May 9 television address as an example of democracy in action—words he would have had to eat when the CIA's involvement became known.

- After the election, the Reagan administration changed its attitude toward D'Aubuisson. The policy-makers decided that a leader who had won 46 percent of the vote—regardless of his alleged bloody background—could not be ignored and that it would be wise to start a dialogue with him. Reagan wrote D'Aubuisson, congratulating him on his strong showing. Secretary of State George P. Shultz, who previously denied D'Aubuisson a visa, asked Helms privately to invite the right-wing leader to Washington.

Footnote: There have been other

occasions when Helms has used his right-wing channels. He won a stunning concession from the Argentines at the beginning of the Falklands war because the military junta trusted him. The Argentines told Helms that they would withdraw their troops from the islands if the British would halt their fleet before it reached the Falklands. This secret concession, which could have prevented the war, got lost in the rush of events.