

PBS MACNEIL-LEHRER REPORT
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ANNOUNCER: President Reagan confronts a skeptical Congress and raises the political ante on Central America.

MACNEIL: Good evening. President Reagan takes the fairly rare step of going before a joint session of Congress this evening. His aim is to persuade a somewhat reluctant Congress to back him in resisting leftist forces in Central America. This dramatic gesture thus pushes the controversy over the U.S. role in El Salvador and Nicaragua to the top of Mr. Reagan's foreign policy agenda and raises the political heat surrounding it. This afternoon Mr. Reagan gave a preview of what's on his mind when he spoke to the American Newspaper Publishers Association in New York. REAGAN: This last point brings up the first responsibility of the president of the United States and of the Congress: the security of this country and the well-being of our people. Tonight I will speak directly to that issue in the context of Central America. We're not accustomed to thinking very much about that region, not accustomed to worrying about possibly a military threat in our own hemisphere. We've almost taken for granted the friendly independent neighbors that we have, but we can no longer ignore there's a fire started and burning in our front yard, and we must respond with both unity and firmness of purpose. The peoples of the hemisphere, this hemisphere, are all Americans, and all of us share a vital stake in the future of democracy and freedom. We have it within our power to act now to keep the situation manageable, and it's in this spirit that I shall speak to the Congress and to the nation tonight.

MACNEIL: Earlier today Mr. Reagan said in an interview with Gannett Newspapers that Central America does not add up to another Vietnam, a fear expressed by some of his congressional critics. Tonight with two leading critics and U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, the Central American policy debate that forms the background to tonight's presidential speech. Jim Lehrer is off; Charlayne Hunter-Gault is in Washington. Charlayne?

HUNTER-GAULT: Robin, the president's highly unusual move comes at a time when his Central American policy is mired in deep criticism and skepticism on Capitol Hill. That was underscored yesterday when an administration request for \$60 million in aid for El Salvador was cut in half by a House Appropriations Subcommittee. That committee also attached strings to the remaining \$30 million and extracted a pledge from the administration to name a special envoy to seek a negotiated peace in El Salvador. It is reported that former Sen. Richard Stone, Democrat of Florida who has been advising the administration on Central America policy, is in line for the post. Nicaragua is a sore spot as well. Amid charges that the administration is illegally funding covert operations in that country, the House Intelligence Committee meets tomorrow to consider cutting off funds for such actions against the Nicaraguan government. Thus, the man known as the great communicator faces a formidable test when he comes before the Congress tonight. Robin?

MACNEIL: The policy the president takes before Congress this evening was shaped in considerable part by his U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick. Mrs. Kirkpatrick has long believed that the U.S. should actively support those in Central America it sees as allies and oppose the forces that threaten them. Madam Ambassador, why does the situation in Central America warrant such a dramatic gesture by the president?

KIRKPATRICK: Well, I think the president said it when he said that the first duty of