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Analysis | Philip Taubman

Releasing Intelligence Data:

A 'No-Win Situation'

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WASHINGTON, March 4 — For better than a year, the United States has trained the eyes and ears of its intelligence agencies on the small nation of El Salvador. That effort, according to top officials of the Reagan Administration, has produced an abundance of "irrefutable" and "unquestionable" information about arms, money and advice flowing to guerrilla forces in El Salvador from the Soviet Union, Cuba and Nicaragua.

The intelligence data, officials say, have formed the basis for the Administration's policy of providing military assistance to the junta that rules El Salvador and of issuing ominous warnings about possible future American action in the area.

But instead of guaranteeing a receptive audience for the Administration's policy, the data have increasingly become as much of an issue as the policy itself. And in the process, the Administration has learned a fundamental rule of governing in Washington: the best secret intelligence information in the world is useless as a means of building popular support for a policy until the data are declassified and disseminated.

The Administration discovered that paradox in recent weeks as its repeated contentions of quality about the intelligence concerning El Salvador have been greeted by demands in Congress to see "the evidence."

"It's a no-win situation," said one senior Administration official privately. "If we go public with the information, we may lose our ability to continue collecting in the field. If we don't, we may lose our chance to build public support for the policy."

Long-Term Damage Feared

The problem has stimulated a lively debate both within the Administration and in Congress about how best to make use of the intelligence data.

To the protectors of America's intelligence secrets, the idea of making a major public disclosure of the data on Central America borders on espionage.

They argue that the release of specific intelligence information would probably cause immediate as well as long-term damage to United States intelligence-gathering capabilities.

In the short run, they contend, the Soviet Union, Cuba and Nicaragua, by learning what the United States knows, could easily determine the means used to collect the information, and take steps to prevent further collection. In the long run, they fear that the Soviet Union might gain important knowledge about American collection capabilities that could stimulate Soviet advances in the arts of espionage.

"We have learned the hard way that release of information, while helpful as a public relations tool, has cost us in ways we never anticipated," said a veteran intelligence official.

60's Disclosures Cited

For example, he said, disclosures about Soviet military strength in the 1960's alerted the Russians to advances in American satellite surveillance capabilities.

Proponents of declassification argue that the intelligence information about El Salvador will be useless to the Government if the Administration cannot build popular support for its policy. As one senior foreign policy official asked, "What's the use of having all this information if no one believes us?"

Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. encountered some of that disbelief today in an appearance before a House Appropriations subcommittee. Pressed for specifics about outside intervention in El Salvador, Mr. Haig told the committee that a "Nicaraguan military man" had been captured in El Salvador helping direct guerrilla operations. Mr. Haig also said that the United States knew of 2,000 Cuban, and 70 Soviet military advisers working with Nicaraguan forces.

The subcommittee chairman, Representative Clarence D. Long, Democrat of Maryland, was unimpressed. He told Mr. Haig that the subcommittee would not approve the Administration's Caribbean Basin economic aid plan until he had a chance to review the raw intelligence data himself.

In a way, Mr. Long's demand represents the legacy of Vietnam and Watergate. Disclosures about officially-sanctioned deceit during the Johnson and Nixon Administrations eroded public faith in Government institutions and officials.

Democrats Request Report

"There was a time when it was good enough for the President or Secretary of State to give his word that a foreign power was opposing American interests abroad," said a senior Reagan Administration official recently. "Sadly, that's no longer the case."

In an effort to resolve what the Reagan Administration knows about outside interference in El Salvador, several Democratic members of the Senate Intelligence Committee, which received a top-level briefing on El Salvador last week, have asked the committee to review the secret data and prepare a sanitized but detailed public report.

Some members have noted that at the same time the Administration is fighting disclosure of data on El Salvador, top officials have talked openly about classified information concerning Soviet military advances, including the development a new long-range bomber.

"Every year about budget time, there's suddenly a round of disclosures about Soviet weapons," said Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont.

Senator Barry Goldwater, chairman of the Intelligence Committee, tried to put an end to the debate over intelligence and El Salvador last week. Following the committee briefing on El Salvador, the Arizona Republican announced, "The American people deserve to know that the officials charged with developing and implementing United States policy in this area are doing so on the basis of solid information."

But, he added, "The details must remain secret."