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TOP REAGAN AIDE DEFENDS THE USE OF COVERT ACTION

AN 'INTERMEDIATE OPTION'

Adviser Calls C.I.A.'s Secret Central America Activities an Alternative to War

By BERNARD GWERTZMAN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 13 — President Reagan's national security adviser said today that covert action in such regions as Central America was increasingly necessary to give the United States an alternative between going to war and doing nothing when a friendly nation is under attack.

His comments constituted one of the strongest Administration justifications for the activities being carried out in Central America under the supervision of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The security adviser, Robert C. McFarlane, said Americans have to wrestle with the question of "should we or should we not have some intermediate option of policy, covert action?"

"The real issue which is being challenged by people on the Hill and publicly is should you do these kinds of things at all, and I think we ought to come to terms with that," he said, referring to the sharp Congressional opposition to covert activities.

No Plans to Send G.I.'s

In an appearance on the NBC News program "Meet the Press," he said his personal view was that the United States should use such covert activities.

While repeating that the Administration had no plans to send United States combat troops to Central America, Mr. McFarlane did not rule out the possibility that this could happen if Congress fails to give the aid the Administration says is necessary to let the Salvadoran Government survive a predicted increase in rebel activity in the fall.

United States aid in Central America falls under three broad headings. The first is direct, public support in military and economic aid of friendly nations such as El Salvador and Honduras. The second is covert backing for anti-Sandinista rebels based in Honduras and Costa Rica who have been fighting the Nicaraguan Government. The third is the presence of United States forces in the area to demonstrate the ability to respond directly.

Seeking Public Support

Senior Administration officials have said that Mr. McFarlane has been a leading advocate among Mr. Reagan's advisers for concentrating on gaining public support for both the public and covert aid programs.

Mr. McFarlane has told associates that the public has to be educated to the fact that there is a "gray area" between "total war" and "total peace," and that the United States cannot afford to give up covert activity.

Mr. McFarlane, in fact, had let it be known privately that he pressed Mr. Reagan to deliver a speech Wednesday on Central America, in part to secure more funds for the C.I.A. actions in Nicaragua, which have been strongly denounced in Congress.

The criticism increased when it was disclosed that the C.I.A. had been involved in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors. Administration officials have said that the mining stopped at the end of March and that it would not be resumed.

Programs of covert action in Nicaragua are in danger of ending, Administration officials have said, because of lack of money. Congress has not passed a request for \$21 million for the anti-Sandinista guerrillas and there is a strong possibility it will not do so.

Mr. Reagan, while condemning Nicaragua, Cuba and the Soviet Union for their activities in Central America, did not directly mention covert activity in his speech. He concentrated on the need for Congress to approve the military aid sought for the Salvadoran Government.

The next day the House, in a symbolic vote of support for Mr. Reagan, narrowly approved a bill that would allow House committees to appropriate up to \$129.4 million for the fiscal year that ends Sept. 30, and \$132.5 million for the 1985 fiscal year. It did so without attaching the conditions that had been opposed by the Administration, but also without approving any aid for the anti-Sandinista rebels.

That bill is an authorization, not an appropriation measure. The vote was a way of sending a signal to the joint House-Senate appropriation conference committee that is to meet this week.

The bill approved Thursday was distinct from the pending and more important requests for what the Administration calls emergency aid for El Salvador and for the Nicaraguan rebels. Those funds depend on the House-Senate appropriations conference, which will discuss requests for \$62 million in military aid for El Salvador and \$21 million for the Nicaraguan rebels.

Both were passed by the Senate in early April, but have not been voted on by the House. Because the House last week approved the other El Salvador aid request, it is expected that the conferees will approve substantial emergency aid for El Salvador.

Nicaraguan Request

There is less of an emergency character now to the \$62 million Salvadoran request because the Administration has used a special feature of law to allocate \$32 million in military aid to El Salvador. The major question is whether the President's speech urging a fight against Communism in Central America has convinced to approve the \$21 million for Nicaragua.

Mr. McFarlane rarely speaks on the record to reporters, preferring to keep his remarks anonymous. But he has appeared on television interview shows to boost particular Administration policies, as he did today.

He said today that American intelligence had picked up information in the last six weeks suggesting that the Cubans had decided to "roughly double" the violence being carried out by insurgents in El Salvador, who are said to be backed by Nicaragua and Cuba.

He said he believed this would result in a "Tet-like" rebel offensive this fall in El Salvador, referring to the heavy attacks by the Communists in South Vietnam during the 1968 Tet holiday period.

Mr. McFarlane said that "we believe honestly that the only way the Salvadoran

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