

NEW YORK TIMES
29 July 1983

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-1

HOUSE VOTES DOWN EFFORT TO WEAKEN BAN ON COVERT AID

MAIN TEST STILL TO COME

President's Supporters Fail to Neutralize Assistance for Anti-Sandinista Rebels

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 28— The House of Representatives today twice rejected attempts by Reagan Administration supporters to neutralize legislation that would halt secret aid to rebels fighting the Government of Nicaragua.

But while critics of the Administration's Central American policy won the day's major battles, they realized during the debate that they lacked the votes for their original proposal, a permanent

ban on covert aid. Accordingly, they proposed a compromise of their own that would make it somewhat easier for the Administration to resume covert aid after it was terminated.

The aid would only be resumed, however, if the President reported to Congress that Nicaragua continued to subsidize armed insurgents fighting the Government of El Salvador and both houses of Congress agreed with him.

Critics Win Early Test

In an early test vote, critics of the Administration won by 221 to 205. Through parliamentary maneuvering, Administration supporters managed to get a second vote on the same issue later in the evening, but they lost again, 223 to 203.

In addition, the legislators adopted an amendment tonight offered by Representative Jim Wright of Texas, the majority leader, that urges the Administration to work through the Organization of American States in seeking a ne-

gotiated settlement to the turmoil in Central America.

Final passage of the bill was still in doubt, but the two test votes indicated that some qualified ban on covert aid would be adopted. The legislation is certain to face serious opposition in the Republican-controlled Senate, but supporters claimed that they had already accomplished an important purpose by demonstrating the serious split on Capitol Hill over Administration policies in Central America.

'Demonstration to the President'

"Clearly the House is divided on this question," said Representative Bill Alexander, Democrat of Arkansas. "This is a demonstration to the President of the will of the American people."

As the debate began, both sides estimated the vote to be extremely close and advanced moderating amendments designed to bring defectors from the other camp. The fluid situation on the House floor reflected the uncertainties troubling many members, who did not approve of the aid but hesitated to cut it off out of fear of helping the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua.

"People are trying to find a way to be on both sides of this issue," noted Representative Michael D. Barnes, Democrat of Maryland. And Representative Daniel A. Mica, Democrat of Florida, said, "Many of us believe the President is acting illegally under United States laws, but we also think the Nicaragua thing will eventually become a major problem for this hemisphere."

Members seeking to end the covert aid to Nicaraguan rebels made a concession to Administration policy when they advanced an amendment to their original proposal. Instead of banning the aid permanently, the new version would halt it for a minimum of 30 days. The aid could then be resumed if the President submitted a report to Congress documenting that Nicaragua continued to help insurgent forces in El Salvador.

Congress would then have to approve the resumption of secret aid by a joint resolution, which has the effect of law. The mechanism is not a legislative veto and would not be barred by recent Supreme Court decisions outlawing such vetoes.

'Great Concern' Noted

Supporters of the original cutoff legislation said their substitute preserved the basic intent of their proposal, which was to take a decisive step against the covert aid program and make known Congressional unhappiness with the Administration's policies.

"The fact that we got more than 200 votes," said Mr. Barnes, "indicates the great concern of the American people about this Administration's policies in Central America."

But Representative Henry J. Hyde, Republican of Illinois, said the bill's supporters had staged "a significant retreat" and gone a long way toward accepting the principle of "symmetry" advanced by the Administration. "Symmetry" means that the Administration is willing to end its covert aid to the Nicaraguan rebels if Nicaragua ends its aid to insurgents battling the Salvadoran Government.

Opponents of the aid cutoff also moved toward a more centrist position by supporting an amendment offered by Representative Mica, the Florida Democrat. The amendment basically accepts the premise that the Administration, through its secret aid, is violating a law banning the use of American money to help overthrow the Nicaraguan Government.

New Plan Is Asked

This proposal would delay the aid cutoff to Oct. 1 at the earliest. In the meantime, the Administration would be required to submit a new plan "providing for the interdiction of arms being shipped from or through Nicaragua to forces hostile to the Government of El Salvador."

In formulating this plan, the bill says, the Administration "shall consider whether it would be useful" to pursue negotiations with Nicaragua or involve other countries of the Western Hemisphere through the Organization of American States or the United Nations.

In addition, the Mica proposal would provide for an end to secret aid if the Nicaraguan Government "is taking steps" to end its own support for the insurgency in El Salvador. That action by Nicaragua could be verified either by the President or the Organization of American States.

While both camps felt compelled to moderate their positions somewhat, the day's debate demonstrated the strong feelings over the issue. Representative William S. Broomfield of Michigan, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Affairs Committee, stated the issue this way: "You're either for or against the policy of the United States."

"We are seeing a conflict over how to approach Central America," said Representative Alexander, the Arkansas Democrat. "This debate raises a central question about the use of force. Are we in a battle of guns and tanks or in a battle of ideas?"