NBC MEET THE PRESS
31 July 1983

KALB: Good day from Washington. I am Marvin Kalb, inviting you to Meet the Press with Congressman Bob Michel of Illinois, the number one Republican in the House of Representatives.

ANNOUNCER: Meet the Press, an unrehearsed press conference, is a public affairs presentation of NBC News.

KALB: Our guest today on Meet the Press is Congressman Bob Michel of Illinois, Republican leader of the House of Representatives. A member of the House for 26 years, Mr. Michel has been serving recently as chief spokesman in the House for administration policies in Central America. Our reporters today are James Risser of The Des Moines Register; Paul *Luvsdorf of The Dallas Morning News; Don *Oberdorfer of The Washington Post; and to open the questioning, our regular panelist Bill Monroe, with NBC News. MONROE: Congressman Michel, the House voted Thursday night to cut off secret aid to the rebels fighting the government of Nicaragua using bases in Honduras. Now, that vote does not now have the effect of law, but do you expect President Reagan to take note of that vote and to modify his policies? MICHEL: Well, I think it's quite obvious that we knew we had trouble with that vote earlier on when the whole discussion began. I would suspect, however, that the resolution that we passed in the House would not, would die of warning in the Senate. If per chance it did pass the Senate, obviously the president would veto it. And with the kind of vote we had in the House of Representatives, his will would be sustained. But that isn't to say the issue has gone away. I think when we have to authorize for the Intelligence Committee and all the rest later on, after they recess, the issue may very well have to be enjoined again.

MONROE: Some Democrats are saying when that issue is joined again, as you have sketched, and they have to put up money for the CIA and other organizations, that if the House deletes money, deletes money for this secret war against Nicaragua, then the administration will have to stop covert aid to those rebels. Is that correct? MICHEL: Well, there's no question about it. The, uh, the president, you know, can only spend that which is authorized by the Congress. So that'll be a very key decision at that time.

MONROE: Congressman, the administration says that the whole purpose of its secret aid to these rebels in Nicaragua was to interdict the flow of arms from Nicaragua to El Salvador. The Democrats in the House are now saying, 'Fine. We will put up the same amount of money to do that in an open way.' What's the matter with that? MICHEL: Well, the problem is it's gonna cost considerably more. And I'm talking about hundreds of millions of dollars. The estimates are, for example, overt action simply to seal off the borders, I guess, of El Salvador would be in the neighborhood of $300 million the first year, a hundred million dollars for the next succeeding years. Actually what we've been doing up to this point, we're getting done for a lot fewer dollars actually being appropriated, and I think it's been fairly successful. Now, Democrats have been critical because rather than simply interdicting, the interdiction of arms, there have been those who have been rallying to the cause to interdict those arms, who've been making statements to the effect that they have some other things in mind, possibly, with the unsettling of things in Nicaragua. Now, admittedly, we have no control over the individual statements of those individuals, but I think it's kind of an ancilliary effect, a side effect that takes place when you've once rallied them to your cause to do your bidding. But that is a bone of contention.

KALB: Our guest on Meet the Press, the House Republican Leader Bob Michel. Mr. Oberdorfer?

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OBERDORFER: Congressman, I would like to follow up on a couple of things you said a moment ago. As I understand you, you're saying that if the House doesn't vote the money for the counterrevolutionary activity in Nicaragua, there's no question but what the administration can't spend it. What is your estimate of the likelihood that the House, having voted to cut off the money, will reverse itself now and vote the money later on? MICHEL: Well, I think that's always a possibility. When members realize that the option here is one of overt versus covert assistance and the overt assistance would be so much more expensive at a time of budget restraints and monumental funds for defense, some members might have some second thoughts about it. And frankly, there'll be an interval of time between now and that time in which the folks out there in the country can speak to their individually elected members of Congress. And my personal feeling is that this whole issue is one that ought to be talked about more informatively by our constituencies out there, who, frankly, up to this point, have not, I don't think, recognized fully what the problem is, number one, and number two, what the administration policy is to deal with that problem.

OBERDORFER: Well, of course, as I heard the debate in these last several days, in the House, the real question wasn't the money or how much money was to be spent. The question was the Democratic leadership and a lot of other people felt it was wrong for the United States to be financing an invasion of another country. And their covert money was for the purpose of not going into Nicaragua, but helping these other countries. Do you think that they're gonna change their mind about the idea of financing an invasion of Nicargua between now and the fall, and if so, why? MICHEL: Well, I have a problem with calling it an invasion of Nicaragua. And you'll have to look at the geographics of that region to recognize what you're doing by way of interdicting arms going from Nicaragua to El Salvador. And unless you're going to have the kind of force.... You know, in Vietnam we spent probably upwards of $3 billion trying to seal off a particular area or sanctuary. When you get to this very complicated business of actually sealing off a border, it gets to be very expensive. I'm not sure whether or not our opponents in this thing would like to commit American troops to part of that effort. I certainly do not want to. And I would rather use those indigenous forces that are there to do some of our bidding if they're inclined to do so rather than having the prospect of the American troops actually engaged.

OBERDORFER: Well, let me follow up. MICHEL: But that's the furthest thing we want to have happen down there.

OBERDORFER: Let me follow up on this question about interdicition. You and others have said that's the purpose, to interdict arms... MICHEL: Yes.

OBERDORFER: ...going into El Salvador. Now, this morning, Charlie Moore of The New York Times, who many of us know as a very fine reporter with a lot of experience, is down there in El Salvador, and he reports the flow of military supplies to the Salvadoran rebels from outside the countries has been only a trickle for many months, according to officials here in Washington. And he quotes a senior administration official as saying that's true and that the Salvadoran rebels have little need of such aid. He is saying basically, as I understand it, that this is a phony issue, that the arms are not coming in from Nicaragua to El Salvador. Do you think this is so, or do you think you've been had about what you've been told? MICHEL: Well, I think we've been making some progress. You know, you just can't discount what we've been doing down there and what effect it has had up to this point, even though it's rather a limited period of time. And so our, I think, there's no question in my mind, but administration is one of stabilizing the situation in El Salvador so that we can cool

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that whole matter down, that eventually we can have another election there. I understand maybe it won't take place now in December, but there's been a request made to move it up into the first part of next year. But that's our primary goal. I think, frankly, if we can stabilize that situation in El Salvador and make absolutely sure that Honduras is secure, that Costa Rica, without any armed forces whatsoever, is not threatened by the forces in Nicaragua, then I think we've made some progress. Then it seems to me you've got kind of a situation where Nicaragua is somewhat isolated from the rest of their neighboring countries. And let's not forget that the president, you know, on the economic with his Caribbean initiative and all, the initiative on the part of the administration to try and do something beyond what we've ever done before, economically, in humanitarian assistance and aid, this can not be discounted. And it's three times the amount that we're doing militarily, but all the emphasis gets placed on the military action and, I think, tends to distort what the administration is really about to do and wants to do in that area.

KALB: Mr. Luvsdorf?

LUVSDORF: Congressman, you said that our primary goal is to stabilize El Salvador.
MICHEL: For a moment.

LUVSDORF: A lot of critics believe that a very important goal, also, is aimed at Nicaragua. The president has said several times that we don't try, want to overthrow the government. But he's also said he doesn't think there can be peace in the region as long as that government is there. Is this administration trying to overthrow the Sandinista government? MICHEL: Well, no, it is not, and it's one of their fomenting and exporting revolution to their neighboring countries. That's the problem. Now the Carter administration before us, you know, thought that they could with infusions of money and assistance down there in Nicaragua, after disposition of Somozoa, that all would be well. And we'd poured a hundred and twenty million dollars of our own assistance into Nicaragua, the Interdevelopment American Bank, a quarter of a billion dollars in that period of time. And what have we seen? Not the free elections or free institutions being pushed and advanced, but rather an authorian government that runs counter to what we really thought this revolution was all about and for the purposes for which there was a revolution. So to say we want to definitely see the government overthrown, that's going too far. We'd like to see them reform their ways a little bit and live up to what the Sandinistas originally came to power for. And for that, if we can help them do that, I think we're making some progress now. If you see around the edges, some of the efforts that we are talking about this thing more realistically. And of course, our policy is one of negotiation along with military and economic assistance, and the three have all got to be taken together. One without the other, the whole policy, in my judgment, blows.

LUVSDORF: You also said you think there's some misunderstanding among the public about what the danger is from the situation down there. But there've been some polls that have shown that the public understands that the Nicaraguans and Cubans are stirring up the trouble down there, but they just don't want to get the United States more involved. Isn't that part of the problem with all of this? MICHEL: Well, I think that's true. In my own poll that I took in my district, you know, the idea, what kind of marks do you give the president for his overall conduct of foreign

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affairs, and they're quite high. And then I get to the specific question, do you think the, would you support the administration's policy toward Central America, and it's 2 to 1 opposed to it. And I have to think in my own mind do they really recognize what our problem is and what we ought to be doing about it. And I would think there isn't all that good a knowledge out there, that it is an educational process that has to unfold.

LUVSDORF: Isn't part of it, though, a fear of getting involved in another bottomless pit? I mean, the word Vietnam is turned around a lot. But that, it started small there, and then there we were. MICHEL: Well, I think there's some danger to that. I think there's no question that whenever there's the possibility of involvement of American troops, even when we talk about 55 military advisers, my view is to hold that number at that level. And I've made it quite clear to the administration. Now there's some apprehension and fear out there on the part of the American public. We don't want to get too far out in front. Any commander leading, whether it's a platoon, company or an army, you've got to have the troops supporting you, and I'm talking about the American public supporting the overall policy in addition to having a majority of the Congress.