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Argentina Linked to Rise in Covert U.S. Actions

Against Sandinists

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WASHINGTON, April 7 — United States involvement in covert guerrilla activities against Nicaragua increased sharply last year after Argentina largely halted its assistance to the rebels, according to Administration officials. The Argentine move was in reaction to President Reagan's support for Britain in the Falkland war, the officials said.

Until the early months of 1982, the officials said, Argentina had primary responsibility for financing and training the anti-Sandinist guerrillas to intercept military supplies going through Nicaragua to El Salvador and Guatemala. Beginning last fall, the officials said, United States dollars, personnel and direction were added, first to sustain the interdiction operations and later to expand them.

As a result, the officials said, the United States found itself providing direct aid to a guerrilla operation whose aim — the overthrow of the Sandinist Government — went beyond Washington's goal of intercepting arms. The United States was thus brought into a potential direct confrontation with Nicaragua.

To prevent precisely this outcome, the officials said, a number of Administration members had fought hard but in vain to persuade Mr. Reagan not to side openly with Britain against Argentina. Argentina attacked the Falkland Islands on April 2, 1982, and surrendered on June 14.

Complicated and Confusing

The Administration officials related these details over the past few days in an effort to show there was no deliberate effort within the Reagan Administration to violate the law barring actions to overthrow the Government of Nicaragua, as some Congressional critics have suggested.

The officials described complicated and often confusing accounts of more than three years of covert American actions in Nicaragua and against its Government.

The centerpiece, the officials said, was an arrangement worked out between the Reagan Administration and the Argentine ruling junta led by President Leopoldo Galtieri.

Under the pact, Argentina would be responsible, with some American funds

and intelligence support, for attacking the flow of supplies moving through Nicaragua to El Salvador and Guatemala. Guatemala, El Salvador's neighbor to the north, had been battling a leftist-led guerrilla movement that predated by several years the one in El Salvador. The United States took for itself the tasks of curtailing Nicaraguan actions against Honduras, for providing money to political opposition groups in Nicaragua and for maintaining liaison with Nicaraguan exiles.

The officials said the Administration was clear about the difficulties inherent in the arrangement. General Galtieri's support for the anti-Sandinist guerrillas predated the Reagan Administration. His goal, never hidden, was to entice the former Sandinist commander Edén Pastora Gómez to lead the guerrillas in an attempt to overthrow the Sandinists. According to Administration officials, this goal was shared by a number of Reagan policy-makers and Central Intelligence Agency operatives, but it was never adopted as official policy.

'It Was Convenient'

"It was convenient to run the operations through the Argentines," a high-ranking intelligence agency official said. "We didn't have to ask questions about their goals that we couldn't escape asking about our own goals when we took over."

In 1979 and 1980, the Carter Administration had undertaken to expand American intelligence collection activities in Central America and to provide funds and other support to anti-Government, democratic individuals and groups in Nicaragua. By this time, relations had already begun to cool between Washington and the Sandinists, whom President Carter had backed in the closing days of their revolution against the long-time dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle.

On March 9, 1981, President Reagan was said to have reaffirmed these covert programs and to have taken an important step beyond them, authorizing the start of covert military action to intercept arms supplies moving through Nicaragua to El Salvador and Guatemala. The budget for these efforts was set at \$19.5 million.

Against the backdrop of what officials said they saw as a stalemated situation at best, but more likely a deteriorating

one, the President and his senior advisers met on Nov. 16, 1981. Mr. Reagan adopted a 10-point program, later to be embodied in National Security Decision Document 17. It called, in general, for increasing economic and military aid to the region.

A Concession to Haig

The document also approved the development of contingency plans to deal with "unacceptable military actions" by Cuba. This was described as a nominal concession to Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr.

Mr. Haig had proposed going further and taking unspecified actions against Cuba, which he termed "the source" of trouble in Central America.

But the 10-point program, the officials said, also called for issuing a "finding" to Congressional intelligence committees notifying them of plans to step up covert intelligence actions in the region. Such a finding, or document, is required by law and gives Congress an opportunity to raise objections.

When the finding was submitted in December, several members of the intelligence committees were said to question whether the covert operations could be limited to interdiction of arms supplies or might evolve into a broader campaign against the Nicaraguan Government.

The finding granted the C.I.A. broad authority to support and conduct "political and paramilitary operations against Cubans and Cuban supply lines" in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Central America. The C.I.A. was also empowered to work with other governments. The other Governments mainly involved were Argentina and Honduras, although Venezuela and Colombia showed interest as well.

Restrictions on Spending

Under the finding, the C.I.A. was allowed to spend \$19.95 million for all covert actions in the region. It was not clear from the officials' comments whether this figure was related to the similar amount mentioned in connection with the March 9, 1981, meeting. In any event, some of it was to serve as "seed money" to finance a 500-man force of Latin Americans. This force would later be joined with a 1,000-man unit then being trained and financed in Honduras, largely by Argentina. The finding told the C.I.A. to work "pri-