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A Secret War For Nicaragua

A covert operation to restrict the flow of Cuban arms to El Salvador expands into a larger plan to undermine the Sandinista government in Managua, mirroring the Reagan administration deeper in Central America.

The smoky bar in Tegucigalpa was a cousin to Rick's Café in "Casablanca," a nightly gathering place for the dangerous and the desperate in Honduras. Squeezed into a corner one evening last week were four Argentine military advisers, speaking machine-gun Spanish and occasionally stealing furtive glances around the room. A half-dozen Americans stood in a loose line at the bar, drinking beer and talking too loudly about guns. In the center of the room, grouped around a table that listed far right, were seven men drinking rum. One of them wore a gold earring. He explained that the seven men were Nicara-

guan exiles who belonged to various factions of *la contra*, a band of counterrevolutionaries trying to topple the leftist Sandinista regime. They were ready to move toward Managua, one of the men said. "We just need to hear from The Boss that it's time to go." Who was The Boss? The man with the earring was impatient with stupid questions. "He's the man you call 'Mr. Ambassador'."

The envoy in question was John D. Negroponte, the American ambassador in Honduras. Official sources told NEWSWEEK last week that Negroponte is overseeing an ambitious covert campaign to arm,

train and direct Nicaraguan exiles to intercept the flow of arms to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador. But the operation has another objective: to harass and undermine the Cuban-backed government of Nicaragua. The project traces back to Jimmy Carter's efforts to support Nicaraguan moderates. Ronald Reagan added the task of cutting the Cuban-Nicaraguan arms pipeline to El Salvador. The plot, launched mostly with popguns and *machismo*, now threatens instead to destabilize Honduras, to fortify the Marxists in Nicaragua and to waste U.S. prestige along the tangled banks of the Coco River. Worse, U.S. officials concede there is

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