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Fears for El Salvador's fate said behind Reagan gamble

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The Reagan administration, by making Central American policy a "prime issue," in a battle to win more aid, gambled against the political wisdom that it should avoid controversial policy debate in an election year.

Behind the gamble, according to administration sources, was the widespread fear that the leftist guerrillas in El Salvador would start a Tet-style offensive soon, in an attempt to convince the American public that the war there was unwinnable.

The immediate danger in El Salvador reinforced the broader conviction in the administration that the effort there is vital to American security and must be pursued without letup.

The decision on a high-visibility effort was taken by President Reagan last month, officials said, with overall direction of the effort, particularly as it related to the Congress, given to national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane.

The State Department, according to White House officials, initially opposed a strategy it deemed high-risk and likely to fail.

Administration sources reported that the strategy was worked out in an informal but high-level White House situation room meeting headed by Mr. McFarlane July 20 — the day after the closing of the Democratic convention.

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Those attending, including Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, CIA Director William Casey and Gen. John Vessey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, are all known for their belief that Central America must be a high priority concern of the administration.

The first hint of a new strategy came three days later, when Vice President George Bush announced in a published interview that Central America would be made into a Republican campaign "prime issue."

"The Democrats have been working on an erroneous premise about what has been going on in Central America," Mr. Bush said at the time, indicating the Democrats were oblivious to the nature of the threat.

White House sources now say Mr. Bush's interview was a "trial balloon" which worked and served as the opening salvo of a public campaign to win support for the president's policies in an election year.

Officials have long expressed concern about an autumn guerrilla offensive, and most remain convinced it is coming, most likely next month. "Everybody expects it," said one official.

In light of that immediate threat, the first stage of the administration's go-for-broke strategy targeted additional military aid for El Salvador, and led to the following actions being taken:

- A stepped-up effort at releasing information supporting the administration's case on Central America. Within a period of two weeks, an official Green Book was released giving the most comprehensive details to date of the Nicaraguan military buildup and subversion of its neighbors.

That was followed by the disclosure of information linking the Sandinistas to drug running, which in turn was amplified by orchestrated Senate hearings on the same subject.

At the same time, the administration made available Gen. Paul Gorman, head of the U.S. Southern Command, and Thomas Pickering, U.S. ambassador to El Salvador, for top-secret "Codeword" congressional briefings.

It then released 95 percent of the material to the public — material including films of arms smuggling into El Salvador from Nicaraguan shrimp boats.

According to one White House source, "Gorman did a remarkably good job," a view shared by a number of other administration officials.

- A high-intensity lobbying effort by the administration, led by Mr. McFarlane, resulted in key legislative victories for President Reagan's funding requests for El Salvador for fiscal years 1984 and 1985, even though the current fiscal year ends in less than two months.

That effort has produced a total \$186 million in military assistance for that country this year — a record. This came when a \$70 million supplemental appropriation was added to the \$126 million that had already been appropriated.

According to administration officials, the new money above all buys mobility in the form of more helicopters and trucks, which are expected to keep the guerrillas on the run for the rest of the summer and fall.

It also relieves the concerns of Salvadoran field commanders about ammunition shortages. Such worries, officials point out, resulted in the past in a passive defense.

Now, with the return of Congress after the Republican convention, the administration will turn to winning full funding of the \$8 billion, multi-year economic-development program recommended by the Kissinger Commission — known as the Jackson Plan for the late Sen. Henry Jackson, D-Wash. White House officials have promised another all-out effort.

In Central America, the administration is also conducting high-visibility operations, despite concern that they may spur controversy in an election year.

Recent decisions include:

- Resumption of regular reconnaissance flights over El Salvador in anticipation of the fall offensive. Eleven Mohawk OV-1 aircraft, whose radar can pinpoint troop movements in the dark and relay details to Salvadoran field commanders, will fly for the next six months as they did last February through April.

- Continuation of a policy of pressuring the Sandinista government by naval shows of strength. This month, the recently commissioned battleship Iowa is heading a five-vessel task force that will patrol 50 miles off the Honduran