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COVER STORIES

Harsh Facts, Hard Choices

Reagan appeals for aid against the menace in Central America



One congressional committee voted to cut the military aid he requested for besieged El Salvador. Another sought to ban covert U.S. operations against the aggressive leftist regime in Nicaragua. Polls showed that few voters shared his critical concern over Central America and even fewer wanted the U.S. to become involved in the problem. Yet because he fervently believes his policies are vital to the future of the hemisphere, Ronald Reagan made a bold but politically risky appearance last week before a special joint session of Congress. "A number of times in the past years, members of Congress and the President have come together in meetings like this to resolve a crisis," he said. "I have asked for this meeting in the hope that we can prevent one."

For such a grand occasion, the financial commitment sought by Reagan seemed piddling. As he put it, "The total amount requested for aid to all of Central America in 1984 is about \$600 million; that is less than one-tenth of what Americans will spend this year on coin-operated video games." But failing to make such an investment, he insisted, would have dire consequences. "The national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves there, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere. Our credibility would collapse, our alliances would crumble, and the safety of our homeland would be put at jeopardy."

Whether Reagan succeeded in heading off a crisis will not be known for months, perhaps years, but his speech could only have helped. It was one of the best of his presidency, forceful yet temperate, without the belligerent anti-Soviet rhetoric that has at times made his foreign policy pronouncements seem more simplistic and militaristic than in fact they are. "It was a model of teamwork," exulted National Security Adviser William Clark at a meeting of Reagan's senior staff the next morning, reflecting the White House's jubilation over the speech.

The reaction on Capitol Hill was restrained. Congressional critics have been sullen and uneasy about the possibility of becoming involved in a no-win commitment in Central America, but most members are wary of an outright confrontation with the Administration.

Hanging over the dispute, as well as almost every other discussion of U.S. intervention abroad for the past decade, is the

chill specter of Viet Nam. Out of fear of repeating that colossal misadventure, Americans have seized hold of its lessons, perhaps inaccurately, perhaps obsessively. There is a strong aversion to undertaking any commitment to shore up threatened pro-American regimes in the Third World, no matter how strategically important they are, and a reluctance to believe that the countries of a region could topple like dominoes, no matter how compelling the evidence of spreading subversion. This is particularly true of Central America, where the political vulnerability clearly also has indigenous causes, including widespread poverty and decades of governmental ineptitude and human rights abuses. "Everyone in Congress is steeped in Viet Nam," says Republican Congressman James Leach of Iowa. "We in Congress abdicated responsibility then, and no one wants to do it again."

In his speech, Reagan confronted the issue directly, as if trying to exorcise its paralyzing spell. "Let me say to those who invoke the memory of Viet Nam: there is no thought of sending American combat troops to Central America." This prompted the night's most thunderous ovation, one that was sustained on both sides of the aisle. (It also drew some querulous editorial fire. The *New York Times*, referring to his pledge not to send in combat troops, asked, "If the stakes are as he says, why on earth not?") In the televised Democratic response, Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut invoked Viet Nam as an argument against the Administration's policies in Central America. "The American people know that we have been down this road before," he said, "and that it only leads to a dark tunnel of endless intervention."

Simply by using a joint session of Congress to turn the spotlight once again on El Salvador, Reagan may have elevated a nagging foreign policy problem into a prominent campaign issue for 1984. Says one of his top political advisers: "It's waving a red flag. It's raising the urgency. It reminds me of Lyndon Johnson's escalating the Viet Nam War."

Yet counterbalancing these concerns, both within the Administration and in Congress, is the fear of being

blamed for losing El Salvador and the rest of Central America. Explains Reagan's chief of staff, James Baker: "We do not want a Central American country to go Communist on our watch. We are pointing out to Congress that it shares that responsibility." Indeed, one reason that Congress has thus far been willing to give Reagan at least half a loaf in his requests for Salvadoran aid is the realization that the fragile regime might otherwise fall to Communist rebels, an event that could not only endanger U.S. security but also prove a political liability for those responsible. By taking his case to Capitol Hill, Reagan made it clear he would hold members accountable if they thwarted his policies. His concluding line: "Who among us would wish to bear responsibility for failing to meet our shared obligation?"

Reagan went to great pains to stress that saving Central America was a bipartisan burden. The only two Presidents he invoked were Democrats. He read at length from Harry Truman's 1947 speech to Congress arguing that international

Communism must be contained and praised Jimmy Carter because he "did not hesitate" to send arms to El Salvador when the rebels launched their "final offensive" in the fall of 1980.

One specific bipartisan bow was the appointment of a special envoy to seek a peaceful solution in Central America. This was the brainchild of Maryland Congressman Clarence Long, chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee that handles foreign aid. Long and his colleagues, however, were disappointed by Reagan's choice of former Democratic Senator Richard Stone of Florida (see box). They feel Stone is too aligned with the current Administration, for which he has undertaken several diplomatic missions in Central America, and with the deposed right-wing dictatorship of Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia in Guatemala, for which he served as a paid lobbyist. The White House held up the appointment for a day while aides assessed Stone's chances for confirmation by the Senate. Many

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