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A Blank Check for Salvador?

The President Gets Tougher

By Ted Szulc

WASHINGTON—On Wednesday, President Reagan will deliver the most dramatic speech of his presidency before a special joint session of Congress. He wants Congress to grant him a virtual blank check to neutralize Nicaragua and prevent a guerrilla victory in El Salvador.

White House advisers privately warn that unless approval is forthcoming, the President may have no alternative but to dispatch American combat troops to El Salvador by the end of the year, despite his past assurances that he would not do so. These officials believe the President may turn away from such assurances if the Salvadoran army continues to crumble. Indeed, it is a near-certainty, they believe, unless American military and economic assistance is markedly increased.

Reagan seeks the authorization of \$110 million in fresh money during this fiscal year in military aid to El Salvador (thus far only \$26 million has been approved). His decision to go to the country over the Salvador issue was made in principle two weeks ago when he realized that if the Congress were to allow the Administration to shift \$60 million in military funds from appropriations for other nations as part of the \$110-million total, it would insist as a precondition that negotiations be started between warring Salvadoran parties—a concept the Administration rejects on the grounds it would lead to "power-sharing" with the rebels. When, last Tuesday, the House Foreign Affairs Committee denied Reagan the other \$50 million, the President resolved to stage the grand drama of appearing before a joint session of Congress.

It is also believed in official circles that the President wants to lay the groundwork in his address for requesting a congressional waiver of the War Powers Act should he determine at a later date that there is need for direct U.S. military intervention in El Salvador. Under the act, the Congress has 90 days to order the President, if it so wishes, to withdraw American forces from a foreign country. Presumably, the Administration fears armed involvement under such limitations.

Finally, the President seeks to prevail over congressional watchdog intelligence committees, which threaten to forbid covert operations against Nicaragua because their scope may violate the law. On Thursday, CIA Director William J. Casey invited members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence to fly down this weekend to the Nicaraguan-Honduran border aboard CIA planes. They are not scheduled to return to Washington until late Tuesday, thus delaying any congressional action against the Administration until after Reagan's speech on Wednesday.

The Administration has charged that arms for Salvadoran guerrillas have been largely flowing through Nicaragua from Cuba, the Soviet Union and Libya, and it justifies the Central Intelligence Agency's support for armed foes of the Sandinista regime as an attempt to stop this flow.

Last week, the Administration's contention was confirmed in part when Brazil seized four Libyan transport aircraft filled with Soviet arms for Nicaragua when they landed to refuel in Recife, claiming that they were carrying hospital equipment. There was no proof that these arms were destined for Salvadoran guerrillas, but the incident helped to corroborate the buildup of the Sandinista army. On Friday, Reagan stressed in a press conference that this incident was "further evidence" that "outside forces," mainly from the communist bloc, are "interfering" in Central America. He also confirmed reports that 50 Palestine Liberation Organization pilots are currently stationed in Nicaragua.

The ultimate goal of the Administration is to stabilize the Salvadoran situation in the government's favor before the onset of the dry season in the autumn and a new rebel offensive, one that could deal a fatal blow to the Washington-backed regime. Such an offensive could at least render difficult the holding of Salvadoran presidential elections scheduled for December.

In its efforts to beef-up Salvadoran military capability, the White House was encouraged by last week's resignation of the controversial defense minister, Gen. Jose Guillermo Garcia, and his replacement by National Guard commander Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova. Garcia had lost the trust of his commanders as well as of American advisers, and Washington hopes that Vides Casanova will do better.

At the same time, the guerrillas may be in serious disarray after the suicide in Managua on April 12 (but announced by the Nicaraguans only last Wednesday) of 63-year-old Salvador Cayetano Carpio, the highly radical commander of the Popular Liberation Forces, the principal Salvadoran rebel group. Carpio is said to have killed himself in despair over the assassination on April 6, also in Managua, of his deputy, Melida Amayo Montes. Another Salvadoran rebel leader, Rogelio Bazzaglia Recinos, was arrested by the Nicaraguans for allegedly murdering her, suggesting the existence of a split among guerrilla factions.

Reagan's dramatic decision to go before a joint session of Congress signals an unprecedented commitment by the White House to a military solution in El Salvador. It rules out the kind of political accommodation before the December elections advocated by some Latin American countries. The extent of U.S. diplomatic isolation was underlined by the inability of Secretary of State George P. Shultz to find a common ground during his conversations in Mexico last week.

The Administration finds itself at odds, too, with recommendations in favor of negotiations made earlier this month by a distinguished commission of U.S. and Latin American figures in a report titled "The

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