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Recanter's Tale:

Lesson in Humility for the U.S.

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WASHINGTON, April 1 — Political considerations, including a desire to help the Secretary of State save face, lay behind the Reagan Administration's ill-fated decision last month to ask a young Nicaraguan to buttress United States assertions of outside interference in El Salvador, according to senior Administration officials.

In the three weeks since Orlando José Tardencilla Espinosa embarrassed the Government by recanting his earlier statements about Nicaragua and Cuban involvement in El Salvador, Administration officials have looked into how the 19-year-old revolutionary hoodwinked the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency.

The exercise, which officials readily acknowledge has provided an education in humility, has produced a number of theories, ranging from sheer incompetence by some American officials to failure to recognize the cultural and political attitudes embraced by Mr. Tardencilla.

The basic problem, however, appears to have been the overeagerness of senior officials to produce someone who could prove that Cuba and Nicaragua were assisting Salvadoran rebels.

Confusion Over Haig's Remarks

The officials had felt this proof was necessary to clear up the confusion caused when Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. told a Congressional committee that a Nicaraguan "military man" had been captured recently in El Salvador.

The Mexican authorities contradicted Mr. Haig's account, describing the Nicaraguan as a student at a Mexican university who had been seized on his way home from Mexico while traveling overland through El Salvador.

By the time Mr. Haig spoke, on March 4, the Nicaraguan was out of Salvadoran custody and in the Mexican Embassy in San Salvador.

When Mr. Haig made his statement to the committee, the Administration was beginning a carefully planned campaign to dispel public doubts about the American accusations of Soviet, Cuban and Nicaraguan interference in El Salvador.

Within days, the Administration made public aerial reconnaissance photographs that intelligence officials said proved that Nicaragua, with Cuban and Soviet assistance, was assembling the largest military force in Central America.

As confusion grew about Mr. Haig's statement on the capture of the "military man," the State Department hit upon the scheme of producing a second captured Nicaraguan, Mr. Tardencilla. He was seized by Salvadoran troops in 1981 while fighting with guerrillas, and was still in jail.

After his capture, Mr. Tardencilla confessed at a new conference that he had received training in Cuba and Ethiopia, and had been sent to El Salvador by the Nicaraguan Government.

The idea of using him to support the Reagan Administration's case set off a series of hurried decisions and miscalculations in San Salvador and Washington that resulted in making him available to the press in Washington a week later on March 12, according to a reconstruction of events based on conversations with leading participants in both capitals.

Officials Defend Their Actions

In defense of their actions, officials said that during a week of interviews with Government officials before he met reporters here, Mr. Tardencilla never wavered from his previous assertions about outside interference in El Salvador. To support this assertion, the officials made available copies of what they said were internal memorandums containing summaries of the discussions with Mr. Tardencilla.

Embassy officials, including representatives of the Central Intelligence Agency, questioned Mr. Tardencilla in San Salvador on March 6 and 7, the officials said. They also reviewed a videotape of Mr. Tardencilla's news conference in San Salvador on Feb. 20, 1981.

According to a summary of the news conference, Mr. Tardencilla said he and his friends were sent to fight in El Salvador by the Nicaraguan Government, which had provided weapons, training and help in infiltrating

into El Salvador. He also said he was sent to Ethiopia in October 1979 for several months of training.

Convinced that Mr. Tardencilla would make a good witness, the American Embassy recommended that he be brought to Washington for further screening, according to officials.

Extensive Questioning by C.I.A.

Accompanied by Salvadoran and American guards, he flew to Washington by way of Miami on March 9. He was held in custody by the C.I.A. at a hotel in Fairfax, Va.

During the next two days, he was questioned extensively in Spanish by C.I.A. experts on Latin America and Africa.

Mr. Tardencilla, according to officials and internal memorandums, repeated his story about having been sent to El Salvador by the Nicaraguan Government. He also provided details about training in Ethiopia that the experts concluded were genuine because of their similarity to other descriptions of Ethiopian training.

A summary of one interview reported: "Subject denied that anyone had coached him or told him what to say. He was adamant that he was his own man and told his own story and that what he was stating was the complete truth and that he feared no reprisals for telling his story."

It added, "On no occasion did he say or intimate that he had been physically beaten or tortured."

He reportedly said that Salvadoran doctors had removed a tumor from his head caused by a traffic accident in Managua in 1979. Mr. Tardencilla later told reporters that the tumor had

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