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In the Growing Debate Over El Salvador—

Can El Salvador be saved from a Communist takeover by a reasonable infusion of American military and economic aid? Or is the U.S. sliding inexorably into a Vietnam quagmire in its efforts to defeat the Marxist guerrillas in that Central American country?

A national debate is shaping up around that issue as the administration weighs critical decisions on the future U.S. role in the conflict.

What follows are comments by key participants in the evolving debate: A defense of administration policy by two cabinet members, and the views of two senators and a congressman following their recent fact-finding mission to El Salvador.

"We Have to Make Sure We Don't Allow on The Mainland a Bastion of Communism"

Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, from an interview on NBC's "The Today Show," February 16:

Q. There have been stories that the CIA feels, without U.S. aid, perhaps combat troops, our side is going to lose in El Salvador—

A. There's been no suggestion of that that I know of. What the suggestion is, what we have discussed and what necessarily has to continue to be discussed is the degree of assistance that we can provide El Salvador—strengthening them to do the job that they want to do. So far, we've been able to do the things requested.

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"American Troops Would Have a Very Difficult Time Fighting in El Salvador"

Representative John P. Murtha, Democrat of Pennsylvania, from a February 17 press conference:

Danger of direct intervention. "I was in the Marines, as an intelligence officer, for a year in Vietnam, and that was rugged territory. You realize how difficult it is to fight in the jungles and how the guerrillas can control the situation in the jungles. El Salvador is worse. I mean, it's—there's not a level piece of land in El Salvador, and American troops would have a very, very difficult time fighting in El Salvador."

EXCERPTED