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Latin council called backer of leftists, not human rights

By John Holmes
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In the spiderweb that comprises "The Network" of left-wing organizations opposed to administration policies, the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) stands out as one of the better known.

COHA literature describes the organization as "a non-profit, tax-exempt independent research and information organization" founded "to promote the common interests of the hemisphere; raise the visibility and increase the importance of the

Part two of a series

inter-American relationship, and encourage the formulation of rational and constructive U.S. policies toward Latin America."

COHA is run by Larry Birns, a tireless one-man army who serves as the council's founder, director, manager, press secretary, congressional liaison, researcher and chief fundraiser. Mr. Birns, extremely visible in liberal circles, calls COHA "a human rights organization."

But some of those who have dealt with COHA don't see it quite that way.

"COHA is not a human rights

group. It is a left-wing foreign policy group that often masquerades as a human rights group," says Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs.

"If you read what they've had to say through the years about human rights violations in Surinam, or Bishop's Grenada, or Cuba — worst of all, Cuba — you will see that they don't care about human rights in leftist or communist regimes," Mr. Abrams told The Times.

Mr. Abrams' duties bring him into contact with countless human rights organizations. He says there is a significant difference between COHA and such groups as the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), a group that shares COHA's political orientation and is an integral part of The Network. "WOLA has political

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TARGET: Reagan's Central American Policy

prejudices just as we all do, but it makes a real effort to promote human rights progress," Mr. Abrams continued.

"So, while I disagree with WOLA, I work with them," he says. "But I will not have any contact with COHA and I do not permit members of the Bureau [of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs] to cooperate with them.

"COHA is not genuine in its stated beliefs in human rights. What it is in fact doing is promoting leftist regimes in Latin America," he said.

Bosco Matamoros, a representative of Nicaragua's anti-Sandinista FDN, agrees.

"They have no concern for human rights, just concern for foreign policy. If they did, they would have asked how many people are jailed by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, but they haven't," he says.

"They know completely the situation down there, but they don't take into account the voices or opinion of the Nicaraguan people. They take as fact whatever is stated by the Sandinistas," Mr. Matamoros said in an interview.

These criticisms are supported by a 1984 Heritage Foundation paper, entitled "The Left's Latin American Lobby."

"An analysis of [COHA's] publications reveals a pattern exaggerating the abuses of right-wing governments or movements, while understating the abuses of leftist regimes or guerrilla groups. This calls into question the integrity of COHA's sources and data that it marshals against the Reagan administration's policies in Central America," the Heritage report states.

"What [COHA's critics are] upset about is that we do a great deal of

accurate research," Mr. Birns counters.

To be sure, there are many who believe COHA's materials are accurate and well-presented. But critics contend that his publications are sometimes biased and have reflected Marxist Sandinista propaganda and disinformation themes.

A COHA press release dated Feb. 13, 1984, declared, "U.S. Helicopter Parts Sale to Guatemala Sure to Kill Indians and Worsen Refugee Flow to United States." And a headline on a release dated May 30, 1984, blared, "Guatemalan Military Dictatorship Set to Rig July Elections."

Two aspects of COHA's operations involve Capitol Hill and the press.

Mr. Birns calls COHA "a publishing mill." His council, he says, produces two to three press releases per week and numerous opinion pieces and reports. Some of these are incorporated by congressmen and their staff members into their own reports, speeches and letters, he says.

"We are a powerful force in the wings" of Congress, Mr. Birns admits.

Several liberal legislators, including Reps. Don Bonker, D-Wash., Robert Garcia, D-N.Y., and Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Ia., are listed as being on COHA's board of directors.

Last year COHA submitted numerous articles to these congressmen and others. As many as 100 of the articles to these congressmen were inserted in the Congressional Record, according to Mr. Birns.

But he denies that COHA engages in lobbying.

"We have no legislative people who go and chat up people on the Hill," he said. "It's pointless to try because many of the people up there know more than we do."

Indeed, aides to several senators and congressmen serving on such important committees as Foreign Relations and Intelligence report that they don't read COHA's releases and have never met with COHA lobbyists. Some say they've never even heard of COHA or Mr. Birns.

Still, says one intelligence analyst, "There are between 40 and 55 con-

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