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# Two deaths put the focus on U.S. policy in Nicaragua

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To a public uneasy over the Reagan administration's military pressure on Nicaragua, the death of two Americans in a rebel helicopter shot down last weekend over that beleaguered country ought to be a matter of grave concern.

The two men were Dana H. Parker, 36, of Huntsville, Ala., a major in the Alabama National Guard, and James P. Powell 3d, 36, of Memphis. They are said to have been members of Civilian-Military Assistance, a group of self-styled freedom fighters that has been providing military equipment and training to the "contras" — the growing CIA-backed rebel force fighting to overthrow Nicaragua's Sandinista government.

With the death of Parker and Powell in combat, Thomas V. Posey, a Decatur, Ala., produce distributor, Marine veteran of Vietnam and one of two men who organized Civilian-Military Assistance last year, has come forward to disclose that the group's effort switched from providing military equipment to El Salvador to aiding the Contras a few months ago after Congress refused to provide further funds for the covert war.

The organization has about 1,000 members in Alabama, Tennessee and Mississippi, Posey says, but its size and its source of funding remain murky.

It may be nothing more than a well-intentioned effort by self-starting patriots or it may be the tip-off that the administration has moved to circumvent Congress' shutoff of funding for the contras.

The history of past CIA secret paramilitary actions warns us to be wary for the risks are great and once started, those kinds of operations are especially difficult to disengage.

The Reagan administration has been doing hand-springs to distance itself from Posey's group, disclaiming any responsibility for the organization's involvement with the contras. But if anything is clear besides the fact that Parker and Powell were killed in action, it is that the State Department and several other U.S. agencies were aware of what Civilian-Military Assistance was doing.

And unless the CIA is not what its cracked up to be, it also had to know. What is not certain by any means, however, is whether top officials in the White House, the State



Department and the Pentagon were clued in; whether the entry of a private U.S. organization on the contras' side and the risks that involved for U.S. policy in Nicaragua were debated at a high level in the administration.

But that's the rub, for again history warns that despite the existence of congressional oversight committees, the intelligence community's covert operations have had a way of becoming the tail wagging the policy-making dog.

As bits and pieces come to light about Civilian-Military Assistance and the government's awareness of its activities, at least two proper questions are in order:

Who's in charge of the administration's Nicaraguan policy and where is it headed?

The buck-passing that was evident in Washington last week was not reassuring.

State Department spokesman John Hughes insisted that "there was no U.S. collaboration with the activities of this group. As they have consistently stated they were acting on their own."

But how does that square with the fact that a military officer on duty at the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador forwarded to the Salvadoran government at least 11 shipments of military supplies sent by Posey? It doesn't.

No U.S. officials acted to block the shipments although the State Department said that it had not issued an export license required for export of some of the military equipment that Posey sent to El Salvador.

Nor did the Treasury Department, How-

ard Kurtz of the Washington Post reported, notify the State Department that Posey had declared on a Treasury application to become a dealer in firearms in the United States, that "I plan to buy weapons and ammo to send to El Salvador."

Now, the State Department has asked the Customs Service to see whether Posey violated federal law by sending the supplies to El Salvador, but the larger question relates to Civilian-Military Assistance's shift of its operations to Nicaragua.

Does the incident that cost Parker and Powell their lives represent an unfortunate, isolated adventure by two "freedom fighters?" Or is it a chilling glimpse of reality, puncturing the rhetoric of the presidential campaign and signalling that the administration for all practical purposes has abandoned efforts to seek a diplomatic settlement with Nicaragua and is bound and determined to overthrow the Sandinistas?

Those are among the most critical questions facing American voters for as President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado of Mexico observed Thursday, U.S. support for the contras has created "a climate of violence and aggression" that has forced the Sandinista government to become desperate and radical — and more heavily armed.

The deaths of Parker and Powell indicate that the tide of events in Nicaragua will not necessarily wait for the election and that the administration is running out of time to manage what happens next — for better or worse.