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Well-oiled protest machine aims to kill Contra aid

Intelligence experts call it "The Network" — a massive but almost invisible spiderweb of hundreds of left-wing groups and organizations, linked together by sinewy threads of personnel, ideology and politics, and seeking dramatic changes in the social, economic and political policies of the United States government.

And now, The Network has focused its attention and resources on its latest target: President Reagan's Latin American policy.

Last Thursday night, shortly after President Reagan announced his plans for bringing a halt to conflict in Nicaragua, a coalition of pacifist church groups began to prepare for a program of "nationally coordinated legal vigils and phone-ins" of protest.

Dennis Marker, spokesman for that coalition, which is called Pledge

of Resistance, was quoted over the weekend as saying that an "active alert" went out over its 55,000-person telephone network. Members of this network were told to call their congressmen the day after Mr. Reagan makes a future television speech on Nicaragua and urge them to vote against his policies.

This apparently well-oiled protest machine is just a small part of what

is called "The Network." Over the years, those who organize, operate and manipulate this web have thrown their efforts behind many causes opposed to policies of the administration.

The Network consists of literally hundreds of groups on the left side of the religious and political spectrum. Many are shoebox and telephone booth outfits — small groups of cause-oriented people working in cramped spaces for little or no money. Some, however, are large, well-funded and highly organized.

Most of these organizations claim to be non-partisan and independent, interested in such noble causes as "human rights" and "social justice." To a degree, that's true; and many individuals who participate in these activities are motivated out of a genuine sense of righteousness and altruism.

But in many cases, that's not the whole truth.

Wall Street Journal columnist Suzanne Garment pointed out that "there is by now — on the American left — a whole cottage industry using the language of human rights and social justice to delegitimize" the United States' efforts to nurture democratic, anti-communist regimes in Latin America.

"While these organizations portray themselves as 'objective' observers of Latin America, this often is not the case," said Joan Fraley, an analyst writing in the Heritage Foundation's "Policy Review."

"Analysis of Latin American issues is offered mainly by organizations whose fundamental ideological perspective is sharply suspicious of, if not openly hostile to, U.S. policy in this region."

Of course, legitimate differences of opinion and debate are essential to the democratic process. But experts who have observed The Network over many years point out that some of the groups employ questionable tactics, including the planting of disinformation and outright deception — a tactic known as "active measures."

"Anything that advances their cause is, in their eyes, the truth. Anything that retards it becomes an untruth," wrote Auguste Lecoeur, a former high-ranking Communist Party official in France, who was drummed out for protesting the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Adds one analyst: "Ever since the creation of the World Peace Council by the Soviet Union in 1949, Moscow has manipulated the slogan 'peace' as a weapon of 'war.'"

And some groups in The Network actively cooperate with organizations established by the Kremlin for just these "active measures," proclaiming allegiance nevertheless to the lofty goal of "world peace."

Among The Network's hundreds of groups, this handful stands out as the largest, best organized and singularly most effective. In an arena littered with amateurs, these are the professionals.

While their names may sound vague and non-partisan, and they may have differing fields of prime interest, many groups in The Network are linked in one way or another to the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), which has been described as a radical "think tank" with headquarters near Dupont Circle.

"IPS has one line [on Central America]: It wants the United States to be disinvolved," says Sam Dickens, director of Interamerican Affairs for the conservative American Security Council.

"The single objective is to curtail

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