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Accuracy, balance of WOLA found lacking by its critics

By Roger Fontaine
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When a congressional delegation arrived in Managua in 1979 shortly after the Sandinista takeover, a member of the group recalls that the first person they met at the airport was an employee of the Washington Office on Latin America.

According to at least one report, a WOLA staffer later showed up at the U.S. ambassador's residence on the arm of one of the Sandinista coman-

Third in a series.

dantes. The comandante, Jaime Wheelock, was then as now in charge of the regime's agriculture program.

Among the hundreds of groups that comprise the left-wing "Net-

work" working to radically influence the administration's policies toward Central and Latin America, WOLA could probably lay claim to being one of the most senior, if not effective, in its area.

Founded in 1974 — and therefore "ancient" as these organizations go — WOLA is headquartered on Maryland Avenue on Capitol Hill,

almost across the street from the Supreme Court in a suite of offices located in the United Methodist Church building.

A major focus of WOLA's activities is Nicaragua. WOLA is providing information in opposition to the Reagan administration's proposed assistance to the resistance forces fighting the Sandinista government.

Unlike some other groups in The Network, WOLA is not a "one-man-with-a-mimeo" affair — the kind of political activist group that once flourished in the heat of Vietnam but then was left to wither.

Rather, WOLA is established. Part of its funding comes from such respectable sources as the MacArthur Foundation and Ford Foundation as well as from mainline

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church bodies. In 1983, WOLA raised \$340,866, more than one-third of it from religious organizations, according to its Annual Report.

The key to WOLA's effectiveness, according to one former legislative staffer familiar with the organization, lies in its ability to provide a steady stream of information to members of Congress and their staffs. "On Capitol Hill, information is everything," the former aide said.

But it is the accuracy and balance of WOLA's information that its critics have called into question.

WOLA literature describes the organization as "an information source for interested officials, providing resources for documenting information, briefing those traveling to Latin America, facilitating interviews between prominent Latin American leaders and U.S. officials, organizing background briefings for congressional staff and giving testimony before congressional committees."

Amid all these activities, one of the major criticisms leveled at WOLA is for practicing a double standard on human rights.

Governments, and organizations that are either anti-communist or non-communist, particularly if they are U.S. allies, typically come under WOLA's close scrutiny, while allegations of human rights violations by socialist states, such as Nicaragua and Cuba, are not subjected to the same degree of attention.

"It means all criticism is directed at one set of problems, and that leads to an unbalanced situation," one WOLA critic said.

"WOLA has been a faithful spokesman for the Sandinistas and El Salvador's guerrillas," said a State Department official.

"They [WOLA] consistently have distorted the fatalities in El Salvador and blurred it so it all appears to be coming from the right," the official said.

Penn Kemble, founder and director of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, said of this double standard, "from a Christian perspective that argument is wholly unacceptable.

"Christians are obliged to judge all governments and institutions from the standpoint of the churches," Mr. Kemble said.

Castro's Cuba has received mention in WOLA reports only in the context of U.S.-Cuban relations. Human rights abuses documented by the Organization of American States and other organizations have been largely ignored.

In fact, according to Update's 1984 index, Cuba went unmentioned the entire year, despite the fact that the newsletter had space for 44 articles on 12 other Latin American countries.

"Our interest is helping to make available to the public a concern for the way, the effect, the impact that U.S. policies have on people who live in this hemisphere," said Joseph T. Eldridge, WOLA's director, in an interview.

Contributions in 1983 from religious institutions totaled \$124,602, according to WOLA's Annual Report. Some of the contributors included, the National Council of Churches, the American Lutheran Church, American Baptist Churches, Maryknoll Sisters and Brothers, Maryknoll Sisters, the Presbyterian Church, the Episcopal Church and Jesuit Missions.

Mr. Eldridge, a Methodist clergyman, is paid his salary by the United Methodist Church Board of Global Ministries, according to a Heritage Foundation analysis published in 1984.

Although WOLA's annual budget may be small by Washington standards, observers point out that WOLA increases its budget's effectiveness by using hardworking volunteers.

Not all critics, however, speak harshly of WOLA.

Elliott Abrams, head of the State

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