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WASHINGTON POST
16 April 1984

Covert Aid Salvage Try Under Way

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The Reagan administration is trying to salvage faltering congressional and public support for its secret war against Nicaragua by attempting to focus new attention on the size of the Soviet and Cuban military buildup in Central America and playing down the controversy over U.S.-directed mining of Nicaraguan harbors.

In an effort to rescue \$21 million in funding for the covert operations, CIA Director William J. Casey told the Senate last week that the controversial CIA-directed mining of Nicaraguan harbors was not an integral part of the program. President Reagan and intelligence officials also began giving stronger emphasis to specific figures about the scope of the threat they see in the region.

CIA officials have said that their intelligence collection shows:

- The Soviet Union is spending between \$4 billion and \$4.5 billion each year in Cuba and \$250 million to \$300 million elsewhere in Central America.

- The Soviets have about 10,000 personnel in Cuba; 8,000 of these are technicians and 2,000 are military. About 100 Soviets are in Nicaragua.

- The Cubans have between 7,000 and 10,000 personnel in Nicaragua, of whom between 2,500 and 3,500 are military. Casey has said that the Cuban military personnel in Nicaragua have shaved their Castro-style beards, discarded their

Cuban uniforms and been integrated into many units of the regular Sandinista army.

The president cited similar, but slightly lower, figures on the Soviet-Cuban presence in Nicaragua in a radio address Saturday in which he said, "We cannot turn our backs on this crisis at our doorstep."

Others in and out of the administration are skeptical of the CIA figures. One congressional source familiar with the intelligence estimates said yesterday, "My fear is that in the effort to save the program they will overstate their case and undermine the truth, which is that there has been a very substantial buildup" by Soviets and Cubans.

This source noted that the Soviets have sent new generations of air defense missiles, planes and maritime equipment to Cuba.

Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.), a member of the Senate intelligence committee who has supported the administration's requests for covert funding, said yesterday that he questioned the Soviet-Cuban troop numbers being used by administration officials.

"The Sandinistas are supposed to be moving Cubans out," he said. "There are probably substantially fewer there than there were six months ago."

Durenberger also criticized the administration for making no real attempt "to sell" Congress or the public on the Kissinger commission's recommendations to fund long-term economic growth in the region.

"The really frustrating thing is the president has got to lift this out of mining and covert operations, and lift it into the larger context and get it out to the American people," he said.

Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), an intelligence committee member who voted against the \$21 million in covert aid, said yesterday that the administration has been trying "to substitute a covert operation for a foreign policy." He said on ABC-TV's "This Week With David Brinkley" that "there is no real military solution short of sending in U.S. troops."

Administration officials made themselves available to reporters over the weekend as part of the new public relations offensive; and former secretary of state Henry A. Kissinger and U.N. Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, also appearing on ABC, urged the president to be more forceful in telling the public about the importance of U.S. interests in Central America.

Kissinger criticized Reagan for letting the debate "degenerate into \$50 million increments" and added that, "at the present level of effort, produced in large part by our domestic division, [the policy] is a recipe for disaster."

Kirkpatrick echoed the need for more aid to head off what might become a "really major threat" to U.S. national security. She said the biggest threat was not combat troops on U.S. borders.

"It is in fact nuclear missiles, it's chemical weapons, which are another really important threat looming on the horizon," Kirkpatrick said. She said she did not have evidence that the Soviets planned to use chemical weapons in Central America but said there had been no warning that they would use them in Southeast Asia, as the administration has alleged.

Casey told U.S. News & World Report in an interview published today, "I think that people in the long run are less concerned about reports of mining Nicaraguan harbors than they are about the danger of creating a wave of immigration into this country if Central America or any part of it fall under Soviet-Cuban domination."

Last week's mining controversy clearly damaged the administration's support in Congress for the covert war, however. Sources said, for instance, that Casey acknowledged to a group of senators last Tuesday that the mining was not an integral part of the U.S. effort in opposing Nicaragua. This distressed some intelligence committee members who had voted the week before to approve \$21 million in additional funding for covert operations in Central America without realizing the extent of the U.S. role in the mining.

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"He seemed to say we had committed an act of war for the hell of it," said one person who attended the briefing.

"He said, in effect, that in the overall scheme of things [the mining] wasn't all that important. I couldn't believe what I was hearing," Durenberger said.

Later that day the Senate voted 84 to 12 to condemn the mining.

Casey and his deputy, John N. McMahon, visited Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) late Friday trying to shore up support for the covert funding. Casey also called several GOP senators Friday, trying to placate some who had called for McMahon's resignation after reading in that day's Washington Post that he had opposed the covert operations. McMahon issued a denial, but congressional sources said he had lobbied discreetly against the funds.

A senior administration official outside the intelligence community said that Casey's influence with the president remained high despite the controversy over the mining.

Among Reagan's circle of national security advisers, this official said, "Casey can still get the president's ear, particularly on some project that appeals to the president's natural anti-communism." Overall, the official said, any senior national security adviser generally is successful in the administration if he proposes action.

"Those who wanted to get us into Lebanon won," he said, adding, "Casey was not in favor of sending troops, but when he was in favor of more action, in withdrawing—even if it was a contradiction of the current administration policy—he was listened to It is a very action-oriented group. Proposals to invade Grenada, get in and then out of Lebanon, open a covert war in Nicaragua, even get rid of [former secretary of state] Al Haig, all seem to win out."

Proposals for long-range consistency in policy tend to get ignored, he said.

One CIA official familiar with Casey's thinking said last week, "Whatever you think of Casey, he truly believes that there is a problem down there in Central America. And there is If this doesn't work . . . , there will be [U.S.] troops down there soon."

Intelligence reports point to a fall offensive by the Salvadoran rebels who are being assisted by Nicaragua.

Casey is known to believe that every U.S. action sends a message to the Soviets and Cubans. He strongly favored the U.S. invasion of Grenada last October because he felt that it sent the message "that we might strike in Nicaragua," a source said. After the Grenada invasion, CIA intelligence showed that the arms flow to Salvadoran rebels declined somewhat. It is now back up.

Casey, the source said, accepts the overall CIA analysis that the Soviets are cautious in the Western Hemisphere and that their short-term actions are meant merely to divert U.S. attention. Casey reportedly has said, "The real battle ground is the Middle East and its strategic position and those oil fields."