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## News Media, Churches Blamed

# 'Distortion' on Latin Policy Decried

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A White House official trying to mobilize constituent support for President Reagan's Central America policy blames "deliberate distortion" by the news media and major U.S. churches for continuing public ignorance of and opposition to the administration's strategy in the region.

"I think the media has tried to portray what we think are the bad guys, the communists, as Robin Hoods," said Faith Ryan Whittlesey, the White House director of public liaison. "And I think the confusion has been deliberate and that accounts for some of the ignorance."

Whittlesey, who is directing the White House campaign to line up conservative, business, labor, ethnic and veterans' groups behind Reagan's Central America policy, said she watched television every night and was "appalled" by coverage she described as "biased and one-sided."

She used similar language to criticize the opposition of American church leaders to administration policy, saying they "tend to characterize the Sandinistas as Robin Hoods, essentially fighting for social justice" in Nicaragua.

Whittlesey said the White House is trying to counteract this by emphasizing that the leftist Sandinista government of Nicaragua has "persecuted Jews, Protestants and Catholics [and] booed and heckled the pope when he was down there trying to offer mass."

Whittlesey made her comments during an interview in which she and an assistant, Morton C. Blackwell, assessed the continuing White House "public diplomacy" campaign designed to circumvent the media and church leaders by mobilizing grass-roots organizations and their internal communications systems.

The two officials presented a written account of 34 specific undertakings on Central America originated or encouraged by the administration, including a supportive editorial in American Legion Magazine, mobilization of chambers of commerce in Latin America, advertisements in

major newspapers placed by the Conservative Caucus and a conference on "Democracy for Nicaragua" sponsored by the Institute of Religion and Democracy.

"They have also published five 'White House Digests' focusing on suppression of civil liberties in Nicaragua, the Soviet-Cuban arms buildup there and the role of the Palestine Liberation Organization in helping the Sandinistas.

A separate tabulation showed that representatives of 150 organizations have participated in weekly "outreach" meetings in the Executive Office Building in which prominent administration officials, including the president, have been featured speakers.

Blackwell characterized all this as "a long, incremental effort" to convince American voters that Reagan's Central America policy makes sense. While acknowledging that it has so far failed to increase popular support for the president, Blackwell—contended the administration is in a "no-lose situation."

"Although we're behind in the public opinion polls right now, we may be in the Churchillian position of the 1930s and the people who are opposing the president's policy may wind up in the same boat that Neville Chamberlain did over the long haul," Blackwell said.

He compared Reagan's warnings about the dangers of the Soviet and Cuban "war machine" in Nicaragua with Winston Churchill's unheeded warnings of German rearmament. Churchill replaced Chamberlain as British prime minister on May 10, 1940, eight months after the outbreak of World War II.

Blackwell said Reagan's policy will be approved by a majority of Americans if the present combination of pressure and negotiation succeeds. "If on the other hand, the president doesn't get what he has re-

quested [in El Salvador] and there is a disaster, it seems to me very reasonable that the American people will pin the blame where it belongs," Blackwell said, making clear that he meant opponents of the policy.

Recent public opinion polls have shown deep voter skepticism about administration policy in Central America. A Washington Post-ABC News poll last week showed overwhelming disapproval of CIA support for guerrillas trying to overthrow the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, although a majority did agree that the situation in Central America was "a threat" to the United States.

In a finding that underpins White House sensitivity about news coverage of Central America, 49 percent of voters said they would tend to believe major television and newspaper reports compared with 39 percent who said they would tend to believe Reagan. The remainder said it would depend on the specific story or had no opinion.

Polls taken for the White House by Richard B. Wirthlin have consistently shown voter indifference and ignorance about Central America. After the president made a major speech about it to a joint session of Congress in April, a Wirthlin poll found that seven out of 10 voters didn't even know he had mentioned Nicaragua.

Wirthlin has attributed the confusion to Central America being "a back-burner issue" for most Americans and to the complexity of a situation in which the United States is supporting guerrillas fighting the leftist government in Nicaragua while opposing leftist guerrillas fighting the U.S.-backed government in El Salvador. Whittlesey criticized published polls, saying questions asked by The Washington Post-ABC News and The New York Times-CBS News polls were "framed to elicit a certain response."

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"The questions can be turned around another way," she said. "For example, [you could ask] how would you feel, if as a result of a communist takeover, 2 million refugees have come to the United States. You get a completely different answer if the question is framed in these terms."

Whittlesey's White House Outreach Working Group on Central America has been controversial even within the White House. She has started from the premise that "going to your natural supporters is one of the basic tenets of political organization as I see it."

Originally, her campaign was strongly backed by national security affairs adviser William P. Clark, a staunch conservative. But Clark reportedly became concerned at a July 20 meeting when one of the White House digests overstated the degree of anti-Semitism attributed to the Sandinistas.

*Staff writer Juan Williams contributed to this report.*