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FILE

Reagan winning the battle for aid to Central America

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan is emerging an apparent winner in his annual confrontation with Congress over policy in Central America, particularly on restoring U.S. aid to Nicaraguan rebels.

An analysis of congressional action on his military and economic aid requests during fiscal 1985 and 1986 shows that, with minor exceptions, Reagan obtained essentially what he wanted for Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and the rebels, chief items on his list of priorities for Central America.

While neither the House nor the Senate has formally appropriated the money for the programs, administration officials and congressional leaders agreed it would be difficult now to block White House requests.

Congress "has given the President pretty much what he wanted in a strong bipartisan effort to deal with the social and development problems that exist in the region and to help the people there build and maintain democratic institutions," said Rep. Dante Fascell (D., Fla.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

A prime example of what Fascell was talking about is the aid program for the Nicaraguan rebels, or *contras*. After three years of congressional opposition, that program is virtually certain to be restored before the current fiscal year ends Sept. 30.

"We seem to have reversed the course with regard to the *contras*," Reagan said at a June 18 news conference. Interrupted by a question about the hostage crisis, Reagan insisted, "As I say, we've reversed the thing on the *contra* aid . . . and it will be more than we originally asked for."

Initially, Reagan sought \$28 million in rebel military aid for 1985. Congress halved that amount to \$14

million on Oct. 10 and put a hold on the money. Reagan renewed the request in April, but Congress killed it.

The day after that action by Congress, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega traveled to Moscow, embarrassing *contra*-aid foes and changing the political climate in favor of aiding the insurgents.

So when Reagan submitted another request in June, Congress not only went for it but added money. The Senate approved \$38 million to be disbursed through the CIA, and the House endorsed \$27 million to be distributed through any government agency except the CIA or the Pentagon.

All that remains to be settled is a conference between House and Senate to reconcile differences in the two bills. Administration officials said Reagan might give up his insistence that the money be funneled through the CIA in exchange for a larger amount of aid, such as the Senate's \$38 million.

The only restriction on the aid money is that it cannot be used for military purposes. But congressional aides said they expect military aid to the *contras* to be renewed sometime in 1986.

The *contra*-aid vote buoyed the administration because it signaled congressional support not only on the issue of the rebels but also on El Salvador and the rest of the Central America policy.

"This is a clear signal to U.S. adversaries that the United States has shed its doubts over the need to act firmly in Central America," said a senior administration official.

The battle for military aid for El Salvador actually was won last year when Jose Napoleon Duarte became president. Congress approved \$128.2 million for 1985 and removed binding human-rights restrictions.

House and Senate foreign-aid bills for 1986 are similar, although this time, because of pressures to reduce the budget deficit, El Salvador's military aid may be somewhat less, between \$100 million and \$113 million.

However, Reagan said after the June 20 slaying of four U.S. Marines in San Salvador that he might increase the aid by using emergency funds.

As for Guatemala, Reagan had been trying since 1981 to restore its military aid, which was cut off in 1977. Congress refused, primarily because of allegations of continuing human-rights violations there.

Last year, for example, Congress killed Reagan's request for \$10 million in military aid but approved \$300,000 to renew the training of Guatemalan military officers.

This year, Congress not only continued the \$300,000 training fund but the Senate approved \$10 million in military aid. The House also endorsed the \$10 million request, but said Guatemala could get the money only if a civilian government replaces the current military regime of Gen. Oscar Mejia Victores and improves human rights. Elections are scheduled for November.

For Honduras, Reagan requested \$86 million in military aid for fiscal year 1986. The Senate approved it in full, but the House reduced the request to \$56 million.