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Covert Actions: Debating Wisdom and Morality

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WASHINGTON, April 7 — The latest disclosures about the Reagan Administration's covert program in Central America have raised old questions about the wisdom and morality of secret American involvement in the internal affairs of other countries.

It is a debate that has been waged off and on for years here, where secrecy and intrigue are a part of life. Should the United States secretly finance paramilitary activities against another government?

Specifically, should the United States finance covert military actions against the Nicaraguan Government, as it is doing now, or should it restrict itself to the above-board effort to bolster the military, economic and political structure of El Salvador, which is threatened by insurgents who the Administration contends are directed and supported from Nicaragua?

The dispute recalls debates after disclosures of American involvement in such places as Cuba, Laos, Angola, the Congo and Guatemala. It has only just begun to be heard on Capitol Hill. But it is causing concern for many Administration officials trying to galvanize public opposition to those seeking to overthrow the American-backed Government in El Salvador.

'The Moral Imprimatur'

"U.S. actions against Nicaragua undercut the moral imprimatur upon which U.S. policy in El Salvador is based," Representative Jim Leach, Republican of Iowa, asserted on the House floor Tuesday. "In El Salvador, we stand foursquarely against those who are armed and financed from abroad and who would shoot their way into power. In Nicaragua, we stand foursquarely with such forces, and are in fact the financiers of anarchy."

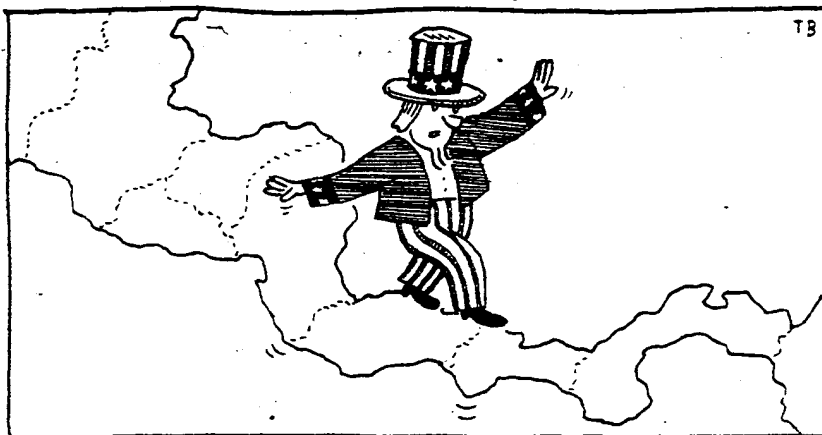
The Reagan Administration, at least until the most recent unraveling of its covert support for anti-Sandinista forces in Nicaragua, has not seen anything inconsistent with opposing insurgents in El Salvador and backing insurrection in Nicaragua. Both courses are consistent with the National Security Council's two-year projection on Central American policy through 1984, which was written last year and made available Wednesday. It said, "In the short run, we must work to eliminate Cuban-Soviet influence in the region."

The projection also expressed satisfaction that in Nicaragua the Sandinists "are under increased pressure as a result of our covert efforts and because of the poor state of the economy." It said at another point that in this period there should be "significant covert activity."

But the document also pointed up continued "serious difficulties with U.S. public and Congressional opinion which jeopardizes our ability to stay the course." It said there should be "a concerted public information effort" to meet this problem.

The document did not seem to recognize the quandary that in the past befell administrations involved in covert backing for paramilitary

Foreign Relations Committee, tried to talk President Kennedy out of going ahead with the covert American-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. In a memorandum to Mr. Kennedy that listed many arguments against the operation, Senator Fulbright said that "to give this activity even covert support is of a piece with the hypocrisy and cynicism for which the United



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forces: that once a large-scale covert operation has become known, the American public has tended to question the American intervention in another country's affairs rather than to criticize the activities by Communists or others that provoked the United States actions in the first place.

Debate on Covert Activity

For years, the value and morality of American covert support for armed intervention in another country has provoked bitter debates in Washington. Mr. Leach, making the case for those who oppose such action, said that by doing what it condemns the Communists for doing, the United States was lowering itself "into the gutter with the violence-prone revolutionaries we so loudly condemn."

Twenty-two years ago, Senator J. W. Fulbright, then chairman of the

States is constantly denouncing the Soviet Union in the United Nations and elsewhere."

Yet Dean Rusk, Secretary of State, argued publicly and privately that however distasteful clandestine military operations were to a democracy, the United States could not afford to give the Communists a monopoly in the "back alleys of the world."

Daniel Arnold, a retired Central Intelligence Agency senior official in Asia, speaking at a symposium on covert action in December 1980, justified paramilitary covert action by asking: "Is it more moral for the United States to stand aside while Soviet-backed forces subvert a society than to covertly intervene to support the far more benign forces with which we share a common interest?"

The special Senate committee that investigated the American intelli-

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gence community in 1976 looked into covert paramilitary action and concluded that "the evidence points toward the failure of paramilitary activity as a technique of covert action."

'Great Potential for Escalating'

"They are difficult, if not impossible, to conceal," it said, warning that such operations "have great potential for escalating into major military commitments." It said that of the five paramilitary activities studied by the committee, only one appeared to have achieved its objectives. That could have been the use of Cuban exiles in the 1960's to maintain the Congo — now Zaire — government in power.

One Administration official, who said his views did not represent those of the policy makers, said today that there was a legitimate question as to whether the Administration should allow itself to be supporting covert military operations.

He said that the fact that the covert operation had been "more or less exposed" had allowed the Communists to divert public attention away from the insurgency in El Salvador. "I think it was a mistake by Haig to give up the high moral ground," he said, referring to former Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr., who was the primary official involved in launching the clandestine operation.

This official said that even in Guatemala, where the C.I.A., in 1954, helped the right-wing army officers overthrow a civilian government, the "victory" in the long run was costly to the United States because it provided continual grist for those accusing the United States of "imperialism" in Latin America.

Another official said that his concern was regardless of whether reports of covert operations in Nicaragua were correct, they "titillated" the press and made it difficult for the Administration to publicize the reforms of the Salvadoran Government and to focus on the activities of the Nicaraguan-backed insurgents in El Salvador.