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OPINION

Proper skepticism about US counterterrorism aid

By Pat M. Holt

THE administration wants \$54 million for counterterrorist activities in Central America, and Congress is rightly skeptical.

Counterterrorism sounds good. Who could possibly be in favor of terrorism? But we've been down this road before, and it leads to trouble.

Twenty-five years ago, counterterrorism was called counterinsurgency, and the Kennedy administration put much emphasis on it. A big part of it — and a big part of what the Reagan administration now wants to do in Central America — was a public safety program for training police. The idea was to make good police forces out of bad ones, to teach police how to interrogate a witness without resorting to torture. There was also a large element of equipment — such items as radios, patrol cars, and tear gas.

The trouble was that some foreign police forces took the training courses, gladly accepted the equipment, and kept right on beating people up. Through the public safety program, the United States was inevitably linked to these activities in the minds of many foreigners.

The problem was especially acute in Latin America. In Brazil the military seizure of power in 1964 was followed by a period of Draconian repression. In Uruguay an American public safety adviser was kidnapped and murdered by terrorists, an incident which provided the plot of the box-office hit movie "State of Siege." More complaints of police brutality came from Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and other countries. In every case, the United States was accused of collusion with the torturers, even of teaching them how to do it and supplying some of the torture devices.

Congress investigated. It found no evidence to support the charges of police brutality. Nevertheless, the damage to the American image was so severe that Congress eventually abolished the program.

One of those who had supported the program but who later played a key role in ending it was Hubert Humphrey, back in the Senate after having served as vice-president. Humphrey was fond of saying that in politics, what's important is not what the facts are but what people think they are. People in Latin America were unshakable in thinking that American advisers were engaged in torture.

This old public safety program was very much like what the Reagan administration is now proposing to reinstate in Central America. The old program did not work. It not only created a political problem for the US; it did very little to control terrorism, or insurgency as it was then called. There is little reason to think the program will work any better now.

There are difficulties beyond that of the American image. Except in Costa Rica, Central American police forces are subject to none of the political and judicial restraints which apply to US police forces. In Central America, citizen complaints are brushed off. The judicial system simply does not work: It neither punishes the guilty nor protects the innocent. Most Americans find a police presence in their neighborhoods reassuring; most Guatemalans find it threatening.

There is another problem. Once techniques are transferred through training courses, or once equipment is delivered and installed, the US loses all control over how the techniques and equipment are used. One of the more troublesome Guatemalan insurgents in the 1960s learned how to do it in an American course on counterinsurgency. A sophisticated police communications system can be used to capture common criminals, or to track down terrorists, or to keep tabs on opponents of the government. There is a tendency among Central American governments to think someone is a terrorist if he is also a political opponent.

This end-use problem goes far beyond counterterrorism. Some of the Watergate burglars had been taught their trade by the CIA. The illegal use of American military equipment has made several small wars possible — the Turkish invasion of Cyprus and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, among others.

Notwithstanding history, Congress seems likely to give the administration at least part of what it wants. Congress has trouble resisting the argument that we cannot simply do nothing. But there should be no illusions about the consequences of doing this. The next time the Guatemalan Army shoots up a village, people all over the hemisphere are going to see the hand of Uncle Sam — even if the hand is not there.

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