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## Congress and the Contras: The Battle for Capitol Hill

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**P**resident Reagan is encountering intense resistance in Congress to his request for \$100 million to aid the counterrevolutionary exiles, or *contras*, fighting to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The mood on Capitol Hill has changed since last year when Congress gave the President a major victory by lifting the 1984 ban on aid to the *contras* and approving \$27 million for non-lethal (sometimes referred to as "humanitarian") assistance.

A major factor is Reagan's failure to keep the promises he made last year when he was trying to entice a reluctant Congress to approve the \$27-million aid package. In a letter to Rep. Dave McCurdy (D-Okla.), the President pledged to resume bilateral negotiations with the Sandinistas, clean up the *contras'* horrific human-rights record and keep Congress fully informed on how the aid money was being spent. Congress gave Reagan his aid, but the President has yet to keep his promises.

The CIA looked into allegations of contra human rights abuses by asking the contras if the reports were true. They said

no. When the General Accounting Office, an investigative arm of Congress, tried to find out how the \$27 million in non-lethal aid had been spent, the Administration couldn't or wouldn't tell. And the Administration continues to reject all requests that it resume talks with Nicaragua, insisting on the impossible demand that the Sandinistas first agree to negotiations with the contras.

The Administration's obstinate refusal to do what it promised has alienated many of the moderate Democrats who provided Reagan with his margin of victory last year. McCurdy, who serves as a spokesman for some of these members, has already announced that he will vote against the request for \$100 million in additional aid.

Skepticism about the aim of Reagan's policy is also on the rise. Last year, the President argued that aid for the *contras* was needed as an adjunct to diplomacy—to bring the Sandinistas to the bargaining table. Most members are now convinced that the Reagan Administration has no interest in a diplomatic settlement with the Sandinistas, but is implacably dedicated to overthrowing them.

Administration officials routinely argue that there are only two alternatives to aiding the *contras*: the direct use of U.S. troops or the surrender of Central Ameri-

ca to the Warsaw Pact, as White House Communications Director Patrick J. Buchanan put it. Glaringly absent is the option Reagan claimed to be seeking last

year—a negotiated political settlement. White House spokesman Larry Speakes finally punctured that polite fiction two weeks ago when he was asked if the purpose of U.S. policy was to overthrow the Sandinistas. "Yes, to be absolutely frank," he replied.

The candor was refreshing, but it didn't help the Administration's cause on Capitol Hill. If Reagan is intent upon cutting out the Sandinista "cancer," as Secretary of State George P. Shultz calls it, then the *contras* are clearly inadequate to the task. Despite the renewal of aid from the United States, the *contras'* have been incapable of establishing themselves inside Nicaragua because they have no political appeal, not with a command structure including former members of Somoza's National Guard. The last two commanders of the U.S. Southern Command agreed that the *contras* could not overthrow the Sandinistas, even with significant U.S. assistance.

In Congress, the suspicion is growing that aid to the *contras* is not intended to avoid direct U.S. involvement, as the Administration claims, but is setting the stage for it. If the *contras* cannot eliminate the Sandinistas, then U.S. troops can. If the Administration is unwilling to negotiate, then the logic of its policy is inexorable. Eventually it will have to mount an invasion or accept defeat. This is why House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.) warns that

Reagan's policy is leading to another Vietnam in Central America.

The conviction that Reagan is intent on deposing the Sandinistas is also widespread in Latin America. Last month the foreign ministers of eight Latin American nations came to Washington urging the Administration to stop aiding the *contras* and start talking with the Sandinistas. The ministers represented all the major democracies and all our major allies in Latin America. They were turned down flat. The ease with which the Reagan Administration is sacrificing broad hemispheric interests to its obsessive policy of hostility

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toward Nicaragua has become a source of mounting distress on Capitol Hill.

The efforts of the Latin American countries are widely heralded in Congress as the best hope for negotiating a regional peace accord. As evidence of the Administration's antagonism toward the Contadora peace effort grows and the Contadora nations themselves become more vocal in their opposition to U.S. policy, members are finding it harder to maintain the illusion that they can support both Contadora and the *contras*.

Even the Administration's friends in Central America have become uncertain allies. Oscar Arias, who takes office in May as president of Costa Rica, has reaffirmed his country's neutrality toward Nicaragua, called on Washington to halt aid for the *contras* and opened talks with the Sandinistas to establish joint supervision of the border. If the talks succeed, it will mean an end to Washington's hopes of reviving a "southern front" in the *contra* war.

Jose Azcona, the newly elected president of Honduras, has surprised observers by refusing to allow the United States to resume aid shipments to the *contras* through Honduras. And Christian Democrat Marco Vinicio Cerezo, newly elected president of Guatemala, has been a major catalyst for resuming regional peace talks. Only Jose Napoleon Duarte of El Salvador, mortgaged to Washington by \$500 million in yearly aid, still gives unflinching support to

Reagan. It is no accident that El Salvador is Philip Habib's first stop on his new assignment as presidential envoy to advance peace in Central America—a calculated attempt to show that the Administration will negotiate.

The key to Latin reaction is nationalism. The human and economic toll of the region's conflicts is staggering. Central Americans are coming to resent Washington's willingness, in pursuit of its own interests, to fuel the wars that are consuming their countries.

Reagan has an uphill battle to win approval of his \$100-million aid proposal. Neither the President nor his Democratic opponents in the House of Representatives are talking about compromise. The stage is set for confrontation—a simple yes

or no vote on the President's proposal.

The outcome of this vote will not settle the issue of Washington's relations with Nicaragua, of course, but it will be a major turning point. Reagan will no doubt interpret a victory as an endorsement of his drive to depose the Sandinistas. The war against Nicaragua will escalate, the chances for a negotiated settlement will diminish and the United States will move one step deeper into the Central American quagmire.

If Congress hands the President a defeat, it will be a clear vote of no confidence in Reagan's policy and a signal that both the Congress and the American people want a negotiated agreement with the Sandinistas, not a war against them. □

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