

THE CONTRA DEBATE

Political moves cloud issue of aid to contras

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Amid the flashes of political lightning around the "contra" aid issue, the debate in Washington appears increasingly bogged down in partisan rather than foreign policy considerations.

The political maneuvering intensifies.

President Reagan yesterday put in an appearance at the State Department to view a display of weapons allegedly smuggled to guerrillas in Central America and to meet with three opponents of the Nicaraguan regime. As he was playing up the theme of the export of Marxist revolution, US special envoy Philip Habib was in El Salvador starting to explore the possibilities of a regional diplomatic solution. The President has not ruled out that Mr. Habib might contact Sandinista leaders during his mission.

In Congress there is more and more talk of a possible compromise with the White House on the President's request for a \$100 million aid package. The House votes on the package next Wednesday, with congressional observers still expecting a defeat for Mr. Reagan.

The Senate is planning to begin debate of the issue Monday. Sen. Richard Lugar (R) of Indiana, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, decided not to bring the aid package to a vote in the committee yesterday because of majority opposition to it. Now Senate lawmakers, too, are toying with the idea of a compromise under which aid for the contra rebels would be delayed for several months while diplomatic negotiation is given a chance.

In the end Congress is expected to pass some aid legislation — but it may not resolve the core issues. Diplomatic observers voice concern that, in the midst of political confrontation, fundamental questions raised by the existence of a Marxist-leaning regime in Nicaragua are not being adequately addressed:

- Can the rebels be turned into an effective resistance force capable of inducing the Sandinista government to sit down and negotiate? Would \$70 million in military aid realistically accomplish that objective? Would \$200 million? \$500 million?

- Would an infusion of aid escalate the military confrontation, ultimately requiring the commitment of US troops? Should the US be willing to send troops?

- If the Congress does not approve aid, and diplomatic efforts do not succeed, are the lawmakers — and the American people — prepared to live with a Marxist regime openly committed to the spread of its left-wing ideology? What would be the consequences for regional stability?

- What is Nicaragua actually doing to destabilize neighboring countries and promote Marxist revolutions?

- Has the administration made a good-faith effort to bring about a diplomatic solution in Central America? Is a negotiated solution a pie-in-the-sky goal or a realistic objective?

- If the Latin American countries are not willing publicly to support US aid for the contras (but privately nudge the US to

provide such aid) should the US act unilaterally, once again conveying the image of a strong-arm interventionist?

The issues are complex and the answers far from clear. Independent experts on Central America themselves differ on what US policy should be. And because of the growing repressiveness of the Sandinista government, even some former critics of administration policy now believe that diplomatic efforts will not work without some form of military pressure on Managua.

Robert Leiken, a Central America specialist at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, believes that the US should help the contras but that such aid should be tied to several conditions that would test the viability of the resistance movement: That the various rebel groups in Nicaragua be united; that the Unified Nicaraguan Opposition be restructured so as to put the political leaders in charge, that human rights be guaranteed, and that the diplomatic track be pursued.

"If that were passed by 250 or so members of the House and 60 to 70 in the Senate, the Sandinistas would be faced with a serious situation, that is, a bipartisan consensus," says Mr. Leiken.

One factor casting doubts on the administration's position is that there is little hard evidence that the Sandinistas are supplying as much help to guerrilla movements in Central America as is claimed. The administration has not supplied such full information, possibly because it does not wish to disclose US intelligence-gathering methods.

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Former US Secretary of State Dean Rusk suggests that the administration would bolster its case by making public convincing evidence. "If the facts are that Nicaragua is engaged in monkey business in El Salvador and Costa Rica, that is prohibited conduct and I'd be for [contra aid]," he said recently.

Differences of opinion also arise over the effectiveness of diplomacy given the growing radicalization of the Managua regime. Mark Falcoff, of the American Enterprise Institute, faults the Democrats for "burying their heads in the sand" and ignoring the security problem.

At the same time he criticizes the administration for not explaining why there are difficulties with the so-called Contadora process, in which four Latin American countries are trying to achieve a negotiated regional settlement.

"Contadora is very flawed because there can be no political solution without the political will of all the parties to enforce it," says Mr. Falcoff. Would Columbia, Venezuela, Mexico, and Panama (the Contadora countries) be willing to send troops to enforce it asks the scholar?

But opponents of contra aid argue that the Reagan administration has not genuinely supported the Contadora process. Wayne Smith, professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, says the administration

has consistently taken a hostile position against the Nicaraguan government.

In January, he notes, the Contadora countries plus Argentina, Uruguay, Peru and Brazil (the support group) met in Caraballeda, Venezuela, to try to invigorate the diplomatic process. They endorsed the Contadora process and called on the US to resume bilateral negotiations with Nicaragua and stop all aid to the contras. But the US has turned down the plea.

"By rebuffing this overture from the Caraballeda countries and requesting still more aid for the contras, the Reagan administration has placed itself in the position of openly blocking progress toward a Contadora accord," Smith

told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 4. "It is not a position our great nation should be in."

The administration maintains that what these countries say publicly differs with their private position. But diplomatic observers see risks in the US pursuing in effect a unilateralist policy in Latin America.

"I tend to be leery of those who say something in private, because it means their assessment of public opinion is that they would have a hard time defending it," says David Newsom, director of Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy. "So the US could be left holding the bag."

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-Dean Rusk