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CIA Views Minelaying Part Of Covert 'Holding Action'

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The CIA views its involvement in the laying of mines in ports off Nicaragua as part of a "holding action" until its covert war against that country's leftist Sandinista government can be stepped up if President Reagan wins reelection, according to senior administration officials.

Administration officials said the minelaying was justified by intelligence reports pointing to a major autumn offensive by leftist rebels in nearby El Salvador. One official close to the intelligence community said that "tons of material are flowing into El Salvador" from Nicaragua for the offensive, which the officials said could compare to the "Tet offensive" in Vietnam in 1968.

While acknowledging that the CIA's direct involvement in the mining of Nicaraguan ports carries significant political and diplomatic risks, this official said it is intended to "harass" Nicaragua rather than to produce any immediate military objective in Central America.

If Reagan wins reelection, however, according to another senior official, "the president is determined to go all out to gain the upper hand" over leftist forces in the region. Such a stepped-up effort is likely to involve substantially more money for U.S.-supported forces in the region rather than the introduction of U.S. troops, this official said.

The laying of underwater mines was approved after the administration considered and rejected a much greater expansion of the covert war late last year, according to officials.

At one point, when necessary support from Congress was not forthcoming, the White House asked the CIA if it could divert money from

other operations or "slush funds" for operations in Central America. The CIA responded with a legal opinion advising against any attempt to skirt the letter or spirit of congressional oversight.

"The CIA has become very strict on that and does not want to get into any problems like those in the past," one White House official said.

CIA officials reportedly said that the harbor-mining operation was within the guidelines laid down by Congress for the covert war. Congressional intelligence oversight committees were not notified about the mining before it began, officials said.

The CIA began directing mining operations in several Nicaraguan ports about two months ago, according to officials. The mines are dropped from CIA-owned speedboats operated by U.S.-backed Nicaraguan rebels and specially trained Latin American employees of the CIA.

The operation is directed from a larger CIA vessel that stays in international waters, the officials said. That ship is equipped with a helicopter which provides air cover for the minelaying operations, they added.

The mines are described as crude "home-made" devices triggered by the noise of ships passing over them. They may cause extensive damage but are unlikely to sink large ships, officials said. "It is not designed to kill anyone," one official added.

At least eight ships from several countries, including the Soviet Union and the Netherlands, have been damaged by the mines so far, according to the Nicaraguan government.

Administration officials have told congressional intelligence committees that the covert war against Nicaragua is in-

tended only to pressure the Sandinistas not to "export" revolution to El Salvador and other nations in the region. But occasional broader justifications from officials have led critics to charge that President Reagan wants to topple the Sandinista government.

The Senate last week approved an administration bill providing \$61.7 million for military aid to El Salvador's U.S.-backed army and \$21 million for CIA support for the Nicaraguan rebels. The House twice rejected the latter request last year and the issue now must be resolved in conference.

Administration officials argued that the \$21 million could be crucial in helping the U.S.-backed forces defeat the expected fall offensive in El Salvador. But another informed source was more skeptical and said the \$21 million would only allow the U.S.-supported forces to maintain a stalemate in the region during the year.

This source said, and the CIA has not disputed, that President Reagan will increase the U.S. effort in the region if he wins reelection in November. "Everything is on hold until then," this source said, adding that Reagan realizes he still would

be unlikely to get the necessary political and congressional support to send U.S. troops into combat in Central America.

Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger told his senior Pentagon staff in a meeting yesterday to make clear, to anyone who asks, that the Pentagon does not have contingency plans to send troops into combat in Central America and to clear all statements on that issue with Michael I. Burch, assistant secretary for public affairs.

Officials said the Pentagon probably does not have contingency plans in the sense of detailed outlines of which Army unit would go where. But, since last summer, U.S. forces have been practicing amphibious landings in Honduras, building

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military facilities there and pre-positioning ammunition and other equipment in the region.

According to administration officials, CIA Director William J. Casey is optimistic about receiving the additional \$21 million from Congress for the covert action in Nicaragua and has not painted an alarmist picture of what will happen if the money does not come through.

But the CIA's worst-case analysis shows that a major leftist rebel offensive in El Salvador could, in the words of one source, "mean the collapse of Salvador." Casey has privately referred to such a prospect as "a double Cuba" that would allow leftists to apply more pressure to other small Central American countries and Mexico.

In the best-case analysis, according to officials, the CIA has determined that, with the \$21 million, there is a "fair prospect" of stopping the current resupply of Salvadoran rebels. They added, however, that Reagan's national security advisers realize it is difficult now to gain much ground in the covert war.

It was "too little, too late," one official said, arguing that the only time to come to terms with leftist forces in Central America was in 1979, when the Sandinistas came to power.

"At that time, some settlement could have been forced if [President] Carter had been willing, but he had effectively withdrawn from the region," this official said, suggesting that Reagan may emphasize this in his reelection campaign.

In a major foreign policy speech here last Friday, Reagan said of Central America, "We have a choice: Either we help America's friends defend themselves, and give democracy a chance; or, we abandon our responsibilities and let the Soviet Union and Cuba shape the destiny of our hemisphere."