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Latin-Aid Votes Likely To Lift Limits on CIA

Congress' Sentiment Seems to Have Shifted

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All restrictions on Central Intelligence Agency participation in the rebel effort against Nicaragua would be lifted under any of the likely outcomes of this week's congressional votes on the issue.

Although legislators once expressed outrage at revelations of direct CIA involvement with the rebels, known as contras, the majority now seem to agree that a CIA presence will be part of the "pressure" on Nicaragua that renewed rebel aid is designed to create.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Even outspoken critics of the contra program say the debate has moved beyond the question of the CIA role in Nicaragua to the larger issue of whether and how "proxy" wars against communism worldwide are to be fought.

"The members see it in more fundamental terms now," said Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and author of a proposal that would end the contra program.

"Either you cut off aid or you provide aid and, if you do choose to provide it, it makes sense to provide it . . . in the most uncluttered, unfettered way," he said.

The shift in congressional sentiment is a measure of increased congressional hostility toward Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government, increasingly viewed as intransigent and repressive toward its domestic critics. Congressional debate is focusing on the best way to push the Sandinistas to the bargaining table, not as in past years on whether they should be forced to negotiate.

The shift is also an indication that members of Congress have more faith now than two years ago that the CIA will keep them informed of its actions.

Members were outraged when they were not told in advance about the CIA's direct involvement in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors in 1983. They expressed shock at CIA publication in 1984 of a training manual for the rebels that advocated "neutralizing" political targets and fomenting riots in order to create rebel martyrs. They complained that CIA accounting methods left out much spending that should have come under the restricted funding.

The CIA responded that it had told the House and Senate intelligence committees, as required, about those programs and others, but committee members said the reports were obscure, misleading and incomplete. The furor led in part to legislation curtailing the CIA role in the contra program.

"After those barriers are taken down, [the president] can do anything he wants to," said Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. "Our only role at that point will be to advise the president for or against the program . . . but even if we say no to it, we can't stop him from doing it."

Intelligence sources confirmed yesterday that the CIA funneled $1.5 million to the contras last year for nonmilitary political and fundraising projects outside the United States. Congressional intelligence officials agreed that the funding did not violate the legislation, which barred aid for "military or paramilitary operations."

"We agree with the agency statement that the CIA is obeying the legislative restriction placed on it," a spokesman for the Senate intelligence panel said.

Asked whether renewed harbor mining or similar CIA efforts might be expected in the future, a key State Department official said, "One hopes they might have learned from experience not to do that kind of thing." Durenberger said such activity might be conducted by Defense Department units or by "Latin assets" instead.

Rep. Dave McCurdy (D-Okla.), a member of the House intelligence committee, is the author of what is regarded as the compromise between President Reagan's $100 million military and "humanitarian" aid request and Hamilton's effort to kill the program, which is not likely to pass.

McCurdy's bill would provide $30 million immediately for training and humanitarian aid, with no restriction on CIA involvement in providing either. The remaining $70 million in military aid would be held for a second vote after 90 days while other Latin nations and the administration push Nicaragua for negotiations with Nicaraguan dissidents. The CIA involvement, he said, is "part of the threat" to induce Nicaragua to talk before the deadline.

"A number of us were concerned all along about the CIA involvement, but my bill doesn't get into that," McCurdy said. "Once negotiations efforts have failed, I'm not going to nickel-and-dime the operation [by restricting the CIA]. At that point, we'll have to make a real decision."

The only pending measure that would affect the CIA role, scheduled to be offered by Reps. Robert J. Mrazek (D-N.Y.) and Norman Y. Mineta (D-Hawaii), would bar U.S. military or American employes of the U.S. government from helping the contras militarily in El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

Mrazek said the purpose is to keep Americans out of the line of fire to avoid "the kind of spark that could produce a full-scale American commitment of troops." The CIA, he said, could still help the contras from anywhere outside the embattled nations.

McCurdy's measure would require that one administration official be made responsible to Congress for the contra program. "His head will be on the line if stupid things are done," McCurdy said. "You can't legislate good faith."

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