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SUBJECT Covert Action in Central America

ANNOUNCER: From Washington, Crossfire. Tonight, covert action in Central America. The hosts for Crossfire, on the left, Tom Braden; on the right, Pat Buchanan. In the crossfire, Stansfield Turner, former Director of the CIA.

PAT BUCHANAN: Yesterday Nicaragua, the government of Nicaragua expelled three Americans, accusing them of being CIA agents who attempted to murder the Foreign Minister of Nicaragua by planting a poisoned bottle of brandy in his cabinet. Today the United States called that a cock-and-bull story, retaliated by expelling 21 Nicaraguan diplomats and closing down all six consulates in the United States.

To talk about that with us tonight, Admiral Stansfield Turner, former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency under President Carter.

TOM BRADEN: Admiral Turner, in the light of the poisoned cigars of the past, the dirty tricks that were perpetrated during the time before you took over the agency, is it conceivable, conceivable, that the poisoned-brandy story is true and that some of the people have reverted -- some of the people up there in Langley have reverted to their old habits?

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: I don't think it's at all conceivable, Tom, because President Ford, with George Bush as his CIA Director, issues a direct presidential order in February of 1976 prohibiting anyone in the CIA from even planning assassination, let alone carrying one out. President Carter reaffirmed that order. President Reagan has reaffirmed that order. It's just against our rules.

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BUCHANAN: You don't believe Bill Casey, who's now Director of the CIA, or any other CIA person that you knew over there would authorize or carry any such thing out, do you?

ADMIRAL TURNER: We've got a written presidential rule against it. And therefore I don't think he would break that at all. No.

BUCHANAN: All right. So the Nicaraguans, obviously, they've gotten someone who has been involved with the CIA and they've hoked up this story about poisoned brandy for poor Father D'Escoto.

Why would they do such a thing unless they wanted to provoke some kind of break in relations with the United States?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Oh, I think they're just doing something to try to make us look bad because we've taken a very strong stand against them. They're desperate to find ways to make the United States look like an evil aggressor against them.

BRADEN: But yet, Admiral Turner, you recently said that you disapproved of the covert operation which Casey and company at the CIA are now running. A covert operation, I say. Actually, it's very overt. Maybe that's what's wrong with it.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes.

BRADEN: Tell me, do you think it's possible -- this is a question we used to worry about when we came out of the OSS after World War II. Do you think it's possible for a democratic nation to run large-scale covert operations?

ADMIRAL TURNER: It's not possible since we've established congressional and White House oversight of intelligence if the covert action is highly divisive. If the responsible members of Congress and the State Department and the White House who now have to know about covert actions are very, very divided, particularly Democrat-Republican, politically divided, then you're not going to keep it a secret.

BRADEN: Because they will leak it. Is that it?

ADMIRAL TURNER: They will leak it. It will leak. Yes.

BUCHANAN: Well, you're talking about the irresponsibility of certain members of Congress who are going to violate --what kind of oath do they take when they get secret information?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, the word I used was "responsible." What I'm saying is I think these people are very

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responsible.

BUCHANAN: Irresponsible, right?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, they are very responsible. They are very good citizens, and they keep secrets normally. But when it gets highly divisive -- and it was in this case because, first, we started using Argentinians to carry out the covert action. Then we, reportedly, started using supporters of dictator Somoza.

BUCHANAN: According to your logic, Admiral, we get down to a point -- look, the American people are divided over foreign policy. The Congress is divided over foreign policy toward Central America, toward the Middle East, toward the Soviet Union, toward arms control. Are you suggesting that the President of the United States really can't use the CIA to advance the policy he's pursuing because the divisions on the Hill mean that people will run out and leak things they don't agree with?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I say to you yes. Either on the Hill or in the White House or in the State Department. Somewhere in this government, this kind of thing will leak if it is very divisive.

BRADEN: ...It seems to me there's another factor here, Admiral. This is a big covert operation, a big one. Even if it weren't leaked, even if everybody in the Senate Intelligence Committee and the House Intelligence Committee kept absolutely mum about something they thought was a very bad idea, wouldn't it have come out, with -- you've got 7000 soldiers going into --from Tegucigalpa over the border into Nicaragua. Isn't obvious that everybody's going to say, "Well, that's got to be CIA. It can be nothing else"?

ADMIRAL TURNER: There's a real risk. But I have seen covert actions take place which did not leak. They weren't quite as extensive as this, perhaps, but fairly sizable. And I think because the people are responsible on the Hill, if there's general agreement up there -- it doesn't mean the whole country's a hundred percent behind it, but it means that these responsible members of Congress recognize that it's for the national good --you can keep it a secret.

BUCHANAN: Well, you're saying, Admiral, that the liberal Democrats who oppose what the President is doing in Central America are leaking it. And therefore, because they're going to leak it, we should give them veto power over how the President uses the CIA.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Now you're putting the words in my mouth.

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BUCHANAN: No, no. I'm asking you.

ADMIRAL TURNER: ...the liberal Democrats. I'm not saying who leaked it. I don't know who leaked it. All I'm saying is it is bound to leak somewhere in this system if there is such high divisiveness associated with a covert action.

BUCHANAN: So what? Why should we let a bunch of irresponsibles who can't keep their promise or their commitment to keep these things secret, why should we let them have veto power by saying, "Well, they're going to leak it. And if they leak it, we can't do it"?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, how can you do a covert action that isn't covert?

BUCHANAN: It's not covert now.

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's right. And the Administration should never have started it because there was never a chance that it would stay covert.

BUCHANAN: All right. It's not covert. So what?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, then let's go ahead with it.

I'm not opposed to trying to topple the government of Nicaragua. I'm not opposed...

BRADEN: What you're saying is that you can't do it by covert operations.

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's right.

BRADEN: All right. Well, then what we should do, if you follow your line, if we're going to take an action in Central America against the Sandinista government, we have to go to the country and say, "We're going to take an action against the Sandinista government. And it's not going to be run by the CIA. We're just going to do it."

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's right.

BRADEN: That, in my view, would be the way to do it.

ADMIRAL TURNER: The only chance you've got.

BUCHANAN: I don't see what the problem is, what the problem is.

BRADEN: The problem is, Pat,...

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BUCHANAN: Hold it. Hold it. Let me ask a question here, in this sense: that, look, yes, everybody is fairly well agreed that the CIA is -- the United States Government, through the CIA, is funding both groups in Nicaragua, or all three groups, however many there are. This is well-known. There's objections to it on the Hill. As long as the President is not prohibited from doing that, what's wrong with just continuing it?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Because the Congress did prohibit him from overthrowing the government of Nicaragua. The covert action is limited to stopping the flow of arms.

Now, what's happened is that the dividing line there is very thin. And already, responsible members of Congress have accused the CIA of breaking that law. That's hurting the CIA in its long-term ability to serve this country. And that's an important institution we shouldn't undermine in this way.

BUCHANAN: Wait a minute, Admiral. Excuse me. That's not really -- is it really hurting the CIA? The CIA says, "Look, the President of the United States has authorized us, he's made the decision, he's told us to put the money in there. And that's what it's for. That's his objective. That's the purpose. As to what they're doing down there in Nicaragua, that's their business. This is our purpose."

ADMIRAL TURNER: But the CIA was found to have committed errors in the past, during the 1975 investigations. And now you've got people standing up and saying, "There they are again breaking the law." That is hurting. That is hurting the reputation of the CIA.

Secondly, the Congress is now talking, and the Administration is about to agree, we understand, to a new rule that will give the Congress the right to veto in advance any future covert actions. That's a real setback for the CIA. It's all come about because of this fiasco over Nicaragua.

BUCHANAN: But it's not going to happen, is it? No President will agree to that.

ADMIRAL TURNER: I am told that the President and the White House are about to agree to that in this one instance. And it's going to set a precedent that...

BUCHANAN: Oh, you mean they will not -- it's not a law, then. They're not going to allow an operation to be conducted in Nicaragua unless they get the approval of Congress.

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's correct. And that will be something the Congress will follow through and pass a law saying,

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"You must tell us in advance of all covert actions."

BRADEN: Isn't it true, Admiral, that if -- I'm trying to follow your point. But I think what you're telling us is that if that goes through as a precedent, then it will be very difficult for a future Director of the CIA to run any covert operations.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Not any, but certain ones where you just can't afford to tell 30 or 40 more people, not only in the Congress, but even in the CIA, what you're doing.

BUCHANAN: Well, what you're saying, Admiral, look...

ADMIRAL TURNER: When people's lives are at risk, for instance, Tom, you won't go out and say, "Stick your life on the line. I'm going up and tell 30 or 40 people about this."

BUCHANAN: Admiral, what you seem to be saying is, look, the CIA can't conduct covert operations that are large.

ADMIRAL TURNER: I'm not sure that's entirely true. I think...

BUCHANAN: Well, if it's large in Central America, it's going to be known that it's CIA. As Tom says, 7000 guys go plowing across the border. They just haven't got together on the weekend. Somebody's organized them, trained them, given them weapons.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I think there have been other operations take place that were just as large and have been kept secret.

BUCHANAN: You say the problem, then, is the political division. Okay?

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's one of the problems. Yes.

BUCHANAN: All right. Well then, does the President not need -- if the CIA should not do it, it should keep its new image, doesn't the President need some sort of instrument to handle situations like Nicaragua that's not somewhere between letting them do what they want to do down there to us and sending in the Marines?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, the other point here is that Nicaragua isn't that important to us, Pat. We have used a tool here that should be reserved, for instance, as a much greater significance.

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BUCHANAN: Hold it, Admiral. Ronald Reagan says Nicaragua is important to us; that if Central America goes, the whole position of the Western Hemisphere goes.

ADMIRAL TURNER: That doesn't make it true, you know.

BUCHANAN: I know. But he's the President. He was elected, and he's the one to set policy. And the CIA is an instrument for carrying out that policy.

Now, do you dis -- your problem, is it not, is with Mr. Reagan's policy?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Oh, I think his policy is very wrong with regard to making Nicaragua an El Salvador this much of a cause celebre. It's wrong, in part, because I think he's going to lose. I think the odds of being able to keep El Salvador from going Marxist are not good. And he's now committed the national reputation...

BRADEN: Okay. When we get back -- when we get back, I want to hear from Admiral Turner as to why he thinks Reagan is wrong and what we should do instead.

* * *

BUCHANAN: Welcome back to Crossfire, where our guest is Stansfield Turner, Admiral Turner, former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency [technical difficulties] covert operations.

Admiral, before the break you were talking about the importance of Central America. Now, here's what Ronald Reagan says, and I gather believes: Nicaragua is a Soviet, Castroite base camp in Central America. It's being used as [technical difficulties] Central America, in all probability, is going with it. And it's going to be a great strategic defeat of the United States, affecing our policy around the world.

Now, you don't think that's right?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, I don't think that's accurate. The parts of Central America that are really important to us are Mexico and Panama. The other countries in between are of rather secondary importance.

What you need to do, then, is buttress those countries, strengthen economically, socially. And you can't do that by appearing to be on the side of the supporters of former dictator Somoza in the Nicaraguan...

BRADEN: Well then, let me follow up on that, Admiral.

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What would you do, given the situation in Nicaragua, where, obviously, they are getting large arms supplies from the Soviet Union and are building a vast army for a small state? What would you do?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I would, again, concentrate first on getting Panama and Mexico into a sound an ecnomic and social situation as I could, so they can resist any overthrow from these other countries.

Secondly, I think we should continue what we're doing in places like El Salvador, strengthening their government, helping them economically in particular, but putting a lot of pressure on El Salvador to clean up their own government situation.

BUCHANAN: How is that...

ADMIRAL TURNER: And then I'd try to contain Nicaragua all you can.

BUCHANAN: Admiral, how is -- everybody would like to see El Salvador, the human rights situation cleaned up. But how can you go about building a sound economy in a place like El Salvador when the guerrillas have destroyed something like $100 million worth of property in an impoverished country like that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, how did you get the guerrillas in the first place? Because the country was so inequitable, socially and economically. You've got to attack both of them at once.

But the basic point I'm making to you is it's a very difficult proposition, and the President isn't likely to win this one. And he's committed himself to winning.

BUCHANAN: You mean, Admiral, that those guerrillas up there in the hills, armed by Castro and indirectly by the Soviet Union, are fighting against social injustice?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. There is social injustice, economic injustice, human rights injustice in El Salvador. It's not unusual in that part of the world.

BUCHANAN: And hwat has a Castroite guerrilla movement ever done, communist guerrilla movement, when it's succeeded, to eliminate social injustice and poverty?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Not a thing. And that's one of our salvations down here. The Sandinistas are Marxists. They're supported by the Cubans in Nicaragua. And look, they've only been there three-four years, and what have they got? They've got

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dissatisfaction within their own government. They've got defectors from the Sandinista government who are fighting against them. Nicaragua...

BUCHANAN: With our help.

ADMIRAL TURNER: No. Even without that. The people in the south, Eden Pastore has not had any help from us, maybe until recently. But they were genuine defectors from the Sandinistas because Marxism, Cuba, the Soviet Union cannot satisfy the economic, social aspirations of the Central American countries.

BUCHANAN: Admiral, it can't satisfy the social or economic aspirations of Chinese or Russians or Poles or Cubans or Hungarians or Afghans or anybody else.

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's probably true.

BUCHANAN: How has that ever helped one of these people to throw off a communist yoke once it's been imposed?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, the Sandinistas are in trouble.

BUCHANAN: They're in trouble because we're aiding the rebels to overthrow them.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Oh, no. They were in trouble before that.

BUCHANAN: All right. You tell me this: How do you think impoverished people in Nicaragua, without weapons, can overthrow a government supported by the Soviets and Cubans, which has 25,000 soldiers and 50,000 militia?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I'm not all that interested in overthrowing that government. It's destabilizing itself. They're going to have a lot of problems. And we can contain that problem and not get ourselves enmeshed in this this way.

BRADEN: You said recently that -- just now, as a matter of fact -- that a covert, a big covert operation, or I guess any covert operation, has to have strong backing from the public, from the general public.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, it has to...

BUCHANAN: A covert operation, strong backing from the public?

BRADEN: Otherwise it might leak.

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BUCHANAN: [Laughter] Otherwise it might leak?

BRADEN: Wait a minute. What I'm saying is if you did tell the public what it was, they would support you.

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's right. That's right. There'd be general support. Not a hundred percent support. You'll never get that.

BRADEN: Which leads me to this question: What covert operations do you conceive of that the public of the United States, if they were told about it, would save, "Three cheers for you"?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, let's say we could use covert action to overthrow Khomeini, particularly when he was being even more obnoxious to the United States, holding our hostages. Don't you think the country would have united behind that?

BRADEN: Yes.

ADMIRAL TURNER: We just didn't have the capability to do it covertly, with a covert action. But it certainly, I think, would have had almost unanimous support in this country.

BRADEN: But you had a heck of an operation going on over there. I understand that the CIA people were ready to get those prisoners out and take them on to a good secret place.

ADMIRAL TURNER: As an ex-CIA man, you know we don't talk about what we talk about or planned.

BRADEN: But I want to congratulate you. I hear it was a great operation.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Thank you.

BUCHANAN: Let me -- when the congratulations are going around on the Iranian thing -- Dr. Brzezinski and there are others who seem to indicate that the CIA was caught -- when you were in charge of it, was caught flat-footed by what happened in Iran, when the Ayatollah came to power, and that it really misread the situation; and that President Carter, at the time --correct me if I'm wrong...

ADMIRAL TURNER: We're the only ones who supplied Brzezinski with information, were we?

BUCHANAN: No. Brzezinski's was the President's National Security Adviser. And I believe he said in his book that the President of the United States was deeply dissatisfied

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with the intelligence he was getting on Iran when you were Director. Is that true?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I don't think that's quite true.

BUCHANAN: Is that what Brzezinski said?

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's not what Brzezinski says, even. He says that he wrote that note that said the President was dissatisfied.

BUCHANAN: Was the President curt or short with you at...

ADMIRAL TURNER: No.

BUCHANAN: He was not. Okay. 'Cause I'm doing this from memory. There was criticism of -- all right, let me ask you the question about...

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well now, I don't want to say that I'm proud of what we did in Iran, Pat. We didn't do as well as we should have.

BRADEN: Intelligence-wise.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Intelligence-wise.

BUCHANAN: That's the biggest debacle in recent memory in the United States.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Oh, no. That's not nearly the biggest debacle, from an intelligence point of view. I'm not talking about the whole country.

You know, predicting coups and revolutions is not the primary function of intelligence. We'd like to be able to do that. But telling the decision-makers where the long-term trends are leading. If we had told them in the last minute that the Shah was going to fall, there's nothing they could have done. The mistake we made was two and three years ahead of time --partly on my watch. I'm not trying to absolve myself -- where we didn't warn them that the undercurrents were as deep and as strong as they were.

BUCHANAN: Let's exonerate individuals and tell us, why did the CIA, generally, fail there?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Because we made a bad assumption. The Shah had tremendous military power and police power. We knew there was a lot of opposition stirring to him. But we assumed

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that when the time came, he would step in with that police power, that military power, and he would crush the budding revolution. The Shah did not do that.

BUCHANAN: All right. As a former intelligence individual who knows -- who can see trends, which way is Central America going? Communist?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think that it will go more Marxist, yes. Not all the way into the communist camp. They know they can't afford that. That's why the Sandinistas have not gone all the way to Marxism, to communism in their country. They know they've got to be under the economic support of the United States. The Soviets are not going to support them.

BRADEN: Why is the CIA -- what's in your book that the CIA wants to censor?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, that's been most exaggerated. And a week ago today, the CIA and I agreed that the seven chapters I have written are cleared, are ready to go. I've turned them over to public people now. I had to take a few things out to get that agreement which I still don't think are classified. There's some disagreement on that. I'm appealing that to Director Casey, and we'll see whether I can put some of those back in. But we have basic agreement that the text is unclassified.

BUCHANAN: Okay.

BRADEN: All right. I hope Director Casey won't take a dim view of what you said tonight and withhold anything from you.

We want to thank you, Pat and I, Admiral Turner, for being our guest on Crossfire tonight.

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BUCHANAN: Tom, one thing I was glad Admiral Turner did, because there's probably some lingering suspicion out there in this country from the '70s, is knock down the idea as preposterous that the Central Intelligence Agency would try to poison with a brandy drink the distinguished Foreign Minister of Nicaragua, my old classmate, Father D'Escoto. What's the point?

BRADEN: It would be a very stupid operation. And I'm sure he's right that it wasn't undertaken.

But I thought that Turner was very interesting, Pat, on the fiasco that's going on down there across the border with Honduras. I just can't conceive how after the Bay of Pigs and

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after so many other things we would try to put seven or eight thousand, I guess maybe up to ten thousand, men across the border and then say we didn't do it.

BUCHANAN: Tom, simply because Jack Kennedy failed, for a lack of nerve, at the Bay of Pigs does not necessarily mean Ronald Reagan lacks nerve or that he's going to fail. This is...

BRADEN: The operation is already blown, Pat. It's already a failure. It is not a covert operation.

BUCHANAN: Tom, simply because the operation is no longer covert, is blown does not mean it's a failure. We'll find that out in the future. Have high hopes.

BRADEN: Except that the Constitution of the United States says if we're going to have a war, we have to declare it.

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