

ABC WORLD NEWS TONIGHT
17 August 1983

CENTRAL AMERICA JENNINGS: And now Central America. ABC News has learned that
/WEINBERGER Defense Secretary Weinberger will travel to El Salvador, Honduras, and Panama during the first week of September, part of an effort to underscore this country's increasing military commitment to the region.

CENTRAL AMERICA JENNINGS: And along with that commitment, the White House said
/TROOP STRENGTH today that a small increase in the number of American military personnel in El Salvador is under consideration. Well, the figures on American military personnel in the region are quite clear. But as ABC's Pentagon correspondent John McWethy reports, here in Washington there is some confusion about just how many people are on the other side.

MCWETHY: For months, the official U.S. government estimate of how many Cubans are in Nicaragua has been 2,000 Cuban soldiers and another 4,000 to 5,000 civilian advisers. Now sources tell ABC News that the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency are being pressured to raise those official estimates significantly with pressure coming from Pentagon civilian leadership and the White House. Intelligence sources say, in fact, there is growing evidence to support a much higher number for Cuban troops in Nicaragua, but the evidence as yet is still being debated. One of the problems, sources say, is a greater effort by Nicaragua to hide the Cuban presence. Intelligence sources tell of newly arriving Cuban soldiers who are having their uniforms stripped of any marking that could identify them as Cuban. They are also being asked to shave the characteristic Castro-like beards which are not commonly worn by Nicaraguan soldiers. Two other worrisome pieces of intelligence about Cuban influence. In Nicaragua, several major airfield improvement projects paid for and built by the Cubans are now finished. The jungle airfields stand empty, sources say, but each has paved parking areas big enough to handle a dozen or more planes. In Cuba there has been a step-up in activity at pilot training centers where Nicaraguan pilots are learning to fly Soviet-made MiGs. As yet, no MiGs have been sent to Nicaragua. For President Reagan, new intelligence on Nicaragua provides both political advantages and disadvantages. If, for example, new estimates showed a doubling of Cuban troop strength in Nicaragua, that would help justify all the U.S. muscle-flexing in that part of the world. But it would also create a real problem for the president, a problem of what to do about it. John McWethy, ABC News, the Pentagon.