

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 1

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# Contras' future

## White House search for ways to bolster Nicaragua rebels runs into new congressional criticism

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Declining support on Capitol Hill for additional covert United States aid to rebel forces fighting the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua has set off a search for policy alternatives at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. The search was complicated Monday when a bipartisan congressional caucus charged that US aid policy in El Salvador has worsened that country's economic and military situation.

The Reagan administration has embarked on a two-tiered strategy to secure new support for the Nicaragua rebels. On one hand, the White House is preparing to launch a renewed effort to persuade Congress to approve \$14 million in additional funding for the rebels, or *contras*, for 1985. The campaign is expected to begin in March and will be supported with new evidence which administration spokesmen say will verify allegations by the Departments of Defense and State that the flow of Soviet arms into Nicaragua is turning the country into an armed camp. At the same time, administration officials are reported to be consulting widely on alternatives to the current program of covert aid — just in case.

On Capitol Hill, congressional sources speak of widespread concern with the course of the Nicaraguan revolution, coupled with growing dissatisfaction over the use of covert aid as an instrument of US policy in Central America. "Pressures must be placed on the Sandinistas to stop harassing their neighbors and being a base for Soviet weapons," says Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Richard G. Lugar (R) of Indiana. But, he adds, "the covert option will not work."

In Nicaragua, meanwhile, the uncertain future of US aid has sent the various *contra* factions

scrambling to broaden their financial bases through contributions from other governments and private organizations — and, in a recent move, with plans to float a bond issue similar to war bonds sold in the United States during World War II.

The program of covert US aid to Nicaragua began in 1981, the first year of the Reagan administration. Since then, \$80 million has been channeled through the Central Intelligence Agency to the various rebel factions operating out of Honduras

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and Costa Rica. Last year, after the House vetoed several proposals for new *contra* aid, a compromise measure was passed which authorized an additional \$14 million for 1985, with the stipulation that funds could not be spent until after Feb. 28, and only then with the approval of both the House and Senate.

Sources here familiar with the *contra* aid issue say the administration's willingness to consider alternatives to covert aid is merely a concession to domestic political reality and not a reflection of any change in policy preferences. Administration officials insist that covert assistance to the rebel forces has provided the only effective leverage to force political reform and to prevent the Sandinista revolution from spreading to other countries in the region.

In what may be a final effort to salvage the covert aid program, the Reagan administration will focus on an arms buildup which has reportedly made Nicaragua an arsenal of Soviet-built helicopters, armored personnel carriers, and anti-aircraft guns.

Congressional sources say that securing approval of new covert aid will be close to impossible. There have been several key defections, including Republican leaders like David Durenberger (R) of Minnesota, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. One source close to the Intelligence Committee, to which any request for covert aid would be referred, says Senator Durenberger will vote

against any proposal for covert aid.

"The White House has overplayed its hand on the issue in the past," says a congressional aide. "They really lost credibility here on the MIG issue," he notes, referring to recent White House allegations, which subsequently proved erroneous, that Soviet fighter aircraft were being shipped to Nicaragua.

Reports of human-rights violations by US-backed *contra* forces have also undercut the administration's case on Capitol Hill.

The case may also be complicated by charges made Monday by the congressional Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus that the administration has provided misleading information to Congress on the results of the US aid program in El Salvador. The report says that excessive amounts of military aid have worsened that nation's plight. It also charges that the administration has violated limits imposed by Congress on the number of US servicemen in Salvador.

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So far, no consensus has formed around any alternative to covert aid. One proposal is for trade sanctions. Nearly a quarter of all Nicaraguan exports come to the US.

The most widely discussed alternative is for some form of overt assistance to an umbrella organization representing the spectrum of political and military opposition to the Managua regime. To this end, the Reagan administration has encouraged Nicaraguan opposition groups to reconcile their highly publicized differences.

Even if they do — and that is a "delicate proposition," one *contra* spokesman notes — the matter of overt aid could raise complex legal questions. Some legal scholars say such assistance to groups seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government would be tantamount to a declaration of war against Nicaragua, a nation with which the US currently has diplomatic relations. Others note there is precedent for aid to dissident factions. During World War II, the US recognized the Vichy government in France while overtly backing the free French under Charles DeGaulle. Currently, the US is selling arms to Taiwan while maintaining diplomatic relations with China.

However the question of means is resolved, the debate over *contra* aid will almost certainly raise larger questions about the appropriate ends of US policy in Central America. In particular, congressional sources say, the administration will have to clarify whether the ultimate aim of US policy encompasses the overthrow of the Sandinista regime.