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DAN RATHER: Much attention has been given to U.S. efforts to overtly help the non-leftist regimes of Central America. Among them, El Salvador and Honduras. Those efforts include military and economic assistance. But there also are covert efforts, as Bob Schakne reports.

ROBERT SCHAKNE: U.S. Government officials confirm that the CIA has organized and is supporting a covert military operation in Central America targeted against the left-wing Sandinista government of Nicaragua. Officials, who ask not to be identified, say the operation is based in neighboring Honduras, that it involves small-scale paramilitary forces conducting raids across the border designed to harass the Nicaraguan government.

The officials say the operation was approved by President Reagan and is strongly supported by CIA Director William Casey. On a day-to-day basis, it's being directed by U.S. Ambassador to Honduras John Negroponte.

In public, State Department officials decline to confirm or deny these reports.

The covert operation in Central America has drawn sharp criticism on Capitol Hill among members of both House and Senate Intelligence Committees. Among the most outspoken is Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy.

SENATOR PATRICK LEAHY: I've told the President [unintelligible] he makes a foreign policy mistake, if he wants to substitute covert activity for a good foreign policy. And I think that they'd find this is a very attractive alternative to the Soviet Union or to Cuba if we're open and above-board in