

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A13NEW YORK TIMES
24 February 1986**ABROAD AT HOME**

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**'Conspiracy
So
Immense'**

One of the ugliest and most dangerous political operations seen in our country in years is now under way in Washington. It is the Reagan Administration's campaign to win a free hand for war on Nicaragua by smearing as pro-Communist all who disagree with the war policy.

It is ugly because it uses the tools of Joe McCarthy: invention, fear and intimidation. It is dangerous because it points the United States toward the use of its own military forces in Nicaragua.

William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, got the operation rolling at a White House briefing for members of Congress on Feb. 18. He passed out copies of a classified report in brown wrappers, entitled "Sandinista Disinformation and Public Manipulation Plan." He took the copies back at the end of the meeting, but officials began leaking it.

The operation is timed to coincide with President Reagan's push for \$100 million in new aid to the contras, most of it for weapons instead of the present "humanitarian" aid. The idea is to picture opponents of that policy as pawns of Communism and the Nicaraguan Government.

Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, said the C.I.A. report showed "how elaborate and skillful are the Sandinistas' plans to manipulate Congress and the press." News agencies quoted a senior Administration official, unnamed, as saying:

"What you have here is a Communist government, allied with the Soviet Union, undertaking a very well organized effort with the help of certain Americans to change a vote in Congress. That is not a Federal crime, but

it is something that Congressmen appear to wish to know about."

You can almost hear the voice of Senator McCarthy at Wheeling, W. Va., 35 years ago this month, charging that the State Department was thick with Communists. The talk of a vast disinformation campaign by the Government of Nicaragua has as much substance, and as much poison, as his talk of "a conspiracy so immense."

But there is something more insidious about the Reagan smear campaign. Joe McCarthy was an outsider. The people running this operation hold positions of power in the United States Government. Worst of all, they are misusing the C.I.A. for purposes of political intimidation.

The Republican chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Senator David Durenberger of Minnesota, was troubled by just that point — the use of intelligence resources for a "transparent political tactic." The aim, he said, was to "portray every senator and Congressman who votes against lethal aid [to the contras] as a stooge of Communism."

Moreover, Joe McCarthy was a cynic. He did not believe those fearful tales he told; he just thought they would help him politically.

Elliott Abrams and the others who are pushing the war on Nicaragua do believe. They are zealots. They are convinced that the Managua Government must be overthrown. That end justifies the use of any means, and disagreement is treason.

The zealotry is what makes the present campaign so dangerous. There is no reason to believe that the contras, with their proven ineptitude and cruelty, are going to get anywhere in Nicaragua with \$100 million more from the United States. When they fail, the zealots' logic will require the intervention of U.S. forces.

The launching pad for a U.S. invasion has been prepared in neighboring Honduras. Over the last three years the Reagan Administration has spent millions there on airstrips, barracks and other supposedly temporary facilities for maneuvers.

It is still hard to believe that the Reagan people would actually send American troops into Nicaragua. But we have to keep remembering that the issue, for them, involves something more than rational calculations. The Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill, warned the other day of the effect of arming the contras and then seeing them lose. "The shame of our defeat," he said, "will bring our troops in there."

Assistant Secretary Abrams has been sensitive in other areas — in helping to get Jean-Claude Duvalier out of Haiti, for example. But on Central America he has the certitude of a Savonarola. Disagree, and you are "anti-American."

McCarthyism may well intimidate some members of Congress; it has done so before. But I do not think it will work with the press and the public generally. This country's best friends in Latin America are advising us urgently against military intervention. History gives the same advice. To return to the game of overthrowing Latin governments is against every American interest, moral and practical. □