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A Reversal In Nicaragua

Instead of rallying Congress to the Nicaraguan freedom fighters, President Reagan's sulfurous rhetoric for the contras has set the scene for his administration's defeat and a reversal in the rising tide of American world prestige. Reaganite hard-liners are desperately looking for some way to turn the tide and persuade the Senate and House to restore \$14 million of "covert" CIA aid to the freedom fighters, but like liberals and other anti-contra forces, the Reaganites see small prospect of victory when the president calls for the vote.

That has caused consternation among some of Reagan's best friends. They are growing critical of Secretary of State George Shultz, whose strong language supporting the freedom fighters contrasts strangely with his diplomatic approaches to the Sandinista regime.

These people foresee major political repercussions throughout the hemisphere: reinforcement of Sandinista rule in Nicaragua, intimidation of Costa Rica and Honduras, confirmation of Fidel Castro's communist power in the Western Hemisphere, loss of U.S. credibility marking the end of a period of relative dynamism in U.S. foreign policy in the East-West struggle.

No matter how displeasing this prospect for their

nation may be to liberal Democrats, their concern is not sufficient for them to support the embarrassingly exposed CIA "covert" war against the Sandinistas. Nor will liberals countenance any switch to private financial aid for the contras or any effort to get help from Israel or other third countries.

A less predictable reaction is building among Republican conservatives. They know that if the Sandinistas triumphantly consolidate their power because of the failure of four years of major effort by the Reagan administration, every Latin American country—Mexico included—may soon find itself up against the cutting edge of communist power.

Such concerns were unveiled in a private luncheon talk here this week to foreign policy hard-liners by Malcolm Wallop, one of the Republican senators best informed on foreign policy. Wallop noted that Sen. Gordon Humphrey had asked Shultz at a recent Armed Services Committee hearing to explain how the United States could possibly negotiate any "mutually advantageous agreement" with a Soviet government "whose behavior is indistinguishable from that of Nazi Germany." Wallop said that Shultz refused to take the question seriously.

Such hard-liners believe an unfavorable vote by Congress should be followed up by Shultz with action along the lines of his Feb. 22 speech in San Francisco. Shultz said then that if Congress refused to restore the CIA aid, it would have the effect of "consigning Nicaragua to the endless darkness of communist tyranny" and lead the United States "down a path of greater danger."

But what is Shultz's plan to avert that catastrophe if CIA funding is denied by Congress? If such a plan exists, it is one of the few secrets left in government.

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