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WASHINGTON POST
 1 January 1987

Reagan Rallied for Aid Till the Hill Surrendered

Initial White House Doubts Were Overcome

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The spring of 1983 was a critical season in U.S. foreign policy. Congress was openly rebelling against President Reagan's "secret" aid to contra rebels fighting the government of Nicaragua and the president, always formidable in any political tussle, decided to abandon the silence he had kept for more than two years on the issue.

In a speech to a joint session of Congress on April 27, Reagan cast El Salvador's war against leftists in Cold War terms. Less than a month later, he referred to the Nicaraguan contras as "freedom fighters." Reagan had stepped into the ring with his gloves off.

In the nearly four years since then, he has occasionally backedpedaled but has never completely left the fight.

As former and current officials connected with the U.S.-contra relationship see it, Reagan eventually wore Congress down in his repeated call for substantial military assistance to the contras. He became the administration's most effective propagandist in painting an image of Nicaragua's Sandinistas as Soviet vassals and in depicting the contra cause as a Latin reincarnation of the American Revolution.

Moreover, they said, Reagan stamped the issue with the imprimatur of his authority and conviction, giving those who worked for

secret actions that became bitterly controversial when disclosed: In 1984, the the Central Intelligence Agency's mining of Nicaraguan harbors, late last year the diversion to the contra cause of profits from U.S. arms sales to Iran.

The vigor with which Reagan became the contras' champion was ironic given initial White House reservations.

When the news broke in March 1982 that armed rebels had conducted raids against the Sandinistas, conservatives in and out of Congress—unaware that the United States had secretly aided the effort—urged Reagan to lead a nationwide campaign for public support for the "freedom fighters," according to several who made the appeal.

But his advisers, notably special assistant Michael K. Deaver, refused. They were wary of the unpleasant resonance between Central American jungles and Vietnam. "Deaver hated this issue. He didn't want Reagan messing with it and ruining his popularity," said Peter Flaherty, head of Citizens for Reagan, an independent lobby formed in 1980 to support the Reagan agenda.

Even the State Department had been unable to persuade the White House to allow Reagan's photograph to be taken with El Salvador's Jose Napoleon Duarte in early 1982, when Duarte's party was running for survival against extremists of the left and the right, according to a senior official at the time.

One important episode occurred in late 1982 when then-U.N. Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, always influential with Reagan, returned from a trip to Nicaragua and urged him to speak out "on the strategic importance of the region to the United States," Kirkpatrick recalled in an interview. A lobbyist close to the debate said Kirkpatrick also argued that Reagan alone could

ignite Americans' sympathies for the contras. Kirkpatrick, however, denies making that case.

Contra supporters on Capitol Hill were also increasingly convinced—as they repeatedly told the White House—that only Reagan's personal popularity and influence could overcome increasing congressional wariness about U.S. involvement in Central America. The House had voted in late 1982 to bar government spending for the purpose of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government.

Reagan's fiery speeches in April and May 1983 were accompanied by a deeper involvement in the contra issue by the State Department and the CIA, according to officials involved at the time. A wary Secretary of State George P. Shultz was "dragged into it kicking and screaming," an aide recalled, and began echoing Reagan's alarms.

Contras 'Sell' Their Case

The CIA intensified its efforts to clean up and unite the squabbling Nicaraguan resistance groups into something resembling an army, using what a Senate source called "a combination of money, threats, force and promises."

Former contra Edgar Chamorro, testifying to the World Court in Nicaragua's 1984 suit over U.S. mining of its harbors, said, "CIA officials told us we could change the votes of many members of Congress if we knew how to 'sell' our case and place [opponents] in a position of 'looking soft on communism' They told us exactly what to say and which members of the Congress to say it to."

A new Office of Public Diplomacy was established in the State Department, after a brief turf struggle with the National Security Council, to promote the Central American policy with the press and public. Faith Ryan Whittlesey's Office of Public Liaison in the White House began to hold briefings for conservative activists; one frequent speaker was Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, an NSC staff member later accused of secretly diverting money from Iranian arms sales to the contra cause.

"The idea was to make the contras over into something to vote for," a Republican lobbyist said. "Congressmen won't give money to an idea."

THE CONTRA COMMITMENT

Second of Two Articles

him the creative certitude of true believers.

Convinced that communism in the Western Hemisphere must be thwarted and that the contras were the only weapon at hand, Reagan aides would subsequently undertake

The operating theory of the Office of Public Diplomacy was that the administration view had not reached middle America because a biased press had given prominence to U.S. church groups' attacks on contra human rights violations and because of liberals' praise for Sandinista social reforms.

The office dispatched speakers nationwide and produced short histories of the Sandinistas, stressing their Cuban and Soviet links and their mistreatment of Nicaragua's Indians in 1981 and 1982. There were glossy reports on the disputes with then-Archbishop Manuel Obando y Bravo and on the incident in March 1983 when Sandinista supporters booed and embarrassed Pope John Paul II for refusing to pray for soldiers killed fighting the contras.

Heat From the Hill

For selected journalists there were also confidential documents that bolstered the administration position and sought to discredit critical human rights reports.

On July 8, 1983, Reagan met with his Cabinet under a new sense of urgency over the deteriorating situation in El Salvador, new Soviet military shipments to Nicaragua and rising complaints from Congress that lawmakers were not getting the full story.

Intelligence committee members were increasingly impatient with the administration argument that aid to the contras served only to interdict Nicaraguan arms shipments. There were too many contras for such a modest task, the members complained, and the rebels were boasting to television cameras that they would soon be in Managua, Nicaragua's capital.

Those feelings exploded with the July disclosure of major U.S. military maneuvers in Honduras, Nicaragua's northern neighbor. Outraged House moderates led a 228-to-195 vote on July 28 to cut off all undercover aid to the contras. As expressed by Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), the House believed that the effort "is not working, it risks a wider war, it is opposed by the American people and it is against the American character."

The July 8 Cabinet meeting launched the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, chaired by former secretary of state Henry A. Kissinger, which "took the heat off Reagan and let him back out of the picture for six months," in the words of a commission official.

In November 1983, the Senate agreed to limit 1984 contra funding to \$24 million, also barring further spending for the rebels from other government sources. Revelations in the spring of 1984 about the mining of Nicaragua's harbors killed the 1985 request, and the last military aid checks went to the contras in May 1984.

That month, Lt. Col. North and Dewey Clarridge, head of the CIA's Latin bureau, visited contra camps in Honduras to offer assurances that the United States would not abandon them, although North did not say specifically where the support would come from, according to several rebels.

The administration was taking heat from conservatives, who felt the White House had been too restrained in its enthusiasm for the contras. "Everybody knows that when Ronald Reagan presses Congress and appeals to the people, he gets what he wants. We felt he should have made a full-court press from the beginning," said F. Andy Messing Jr., a friend of North's who heads the conservative National Defense Council Foundation.

Because of the congressional prohibition on official U.S. support, true believers outside the government tried to come to the contras' aid, often with encouragement from officials such as North. The Stanton Group of conservative activists, meeting often at the house of new-right leader Paul Weyrich, was "the catalytic element" in building private support for the "freedom fighters," who sometimes spoke at the gatherings, according to Messing.

Among those present from the beginning in mid-1984 was retired general John Singlaub, head of the World Anti-Communist League, who later claimed to be coordinating the private effort in the "understanding" that the White House did not disapprove of his work.

North, Messing said, served as "an information hub" to whom all the participants reported, in the knowledge "that the data would be put to good use." But North issued no instructions to those providing private aid, Messing insisted. "We did it ourselves, out of frustration with the administration."

House and Senate select committees and independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh are probing what other avenues North and his colleagues in the NSC, CIA and elsewhere may have pursued to help keep the contras alive during the

fund cutoff. It appears certain that some of the same figures running a contra weapons resupply operation were also helping North sell weapons to Iran in an attempt to free American hostages held in Lebanon. Investigators suspect that profits from the U.S. arms sales to Iran helped finance the contra resupply missions.

STAT

At one point in 1984, North proposed an all-out TV fund-raising campaign to be led by the president, according to several sources. But the administration was not about to buck negative polls on the contra program by discussing Nicaragua before the 1984 presidential elections.

The Democrats were not eager to bring it up either, fearing Republican charges that they were soft on communism, according to Rep. Michael D. Barnes (D-Md.), outgoing chairman of the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Western Hemisphere affairs and a leading critic of the contras.

In May 1984, the administration had a stroke of luck. Congressional favorite Jose Napoleon Duarte was elected president of El Salvador, eventually taking the situation there off the front pages. Reagan's staff considered the possibility that the administration might take over the Contadora peace process—then foundering in Washington's faint praise since its January 1983 creation by Mexico, Venezuela, Panama and Colombia—and send Reagan into the 1984 elections with the mantle of peacemaker.

Langhorne P. Motley, successor to Assistant Secretary of State Thomas O. Enders, leading proponent of "long-term rollback" negotiations, talked Shultz into going to Nicaragua after Duarte's inauguration to open bilateral talks. The move stunned conservatives, but it foundered on Nicaragua's refusal to make any concessions, Motley said.

"The only way we got it [Shultz's trip] to happen was to keep it secret from the NSC until it was too late to stop it, and then there was no way we were going to get any position changes out of them [the NSC]" to carry the talks forward, Motley said.

After Reagan's landslide reelection, Democrats were even less eager to take on the president. "Our whole strategy after that was to postpone an up-or-down vote for two years," Barnes said. "We just didn't have the votes if Reagan had ever presented it that way."

ideas for dealing with Nicaragua, all of which were rejected. A sea blockade of Nicaragua had been studied closely at the Defense Department, but the two carrier battle groups it would have required—more than a dozen ships—were considered too expensive and a risky diversion from Mediterranean commitments, according to two Pentagon sources.

Surgical strikes on Nicaraguan targets were often suggested, "but mostly in angry moments," and were viewed as a last resort, possibly against any attempt to introduce Soviet MiG warplanes into the country, the Pentagon sources said.

Several administration conservatives, notably former ambassador to Costa Rica Curtin Winsor, had argued that diplomatic recognition of Nicaragua should be withdrawn, but intelligence officials said the embassy in Managua was very useful to them. The State Department said its envoys could hardly promote negotiations if there were no ambassador to do the talking.

Economic sanctions against Nicaragua had been proposed as early as 1982, but the Treasury and Commerce departments opposed them as unenforceable, according to an NSC official. After the aid cut-off in 1984, "we pushed it as something that could be done to show the Central American allies we were still serious," an official said.

As each proposal was considered and rejected, the White House kept coming back to what it perceived as an imperative need for military aid to the contras, at virtually any cost, according to officials familiar with the debate.

Nicaragua's image had deteriorated as repression increased in the country, and the contras had improved under CIA tutelage as its forces grew. Putting together the House's fiscal 1986 funding bill for U.S. intelligence activity in the spring of 1985, "we got the shock of our lives when the majority suddenly favored allowing [the CIA to give] advice and intelligence to the contras," an intelligence committee source said.

In early 1985, a top Republican House strategist said, GOP leaders were warning the White House that military aid "just wouldn't fly . . . and we suggested humanitarian aid as a compromise. But they had to be convinced by defeat that they couldn't get it."

'Just a Matter of Time'

That occurred when a proposed package of \$14 million in military aid, in reality a meaningless token

of support, lost again in April 1985. However, not one lawmaker in the floor debate had said anything to defend Nicaragua, and the administration noticed.

"I was saying, 'Listen to these great speeches! This is terrific!' and we were losing the vote and everybody thought I was nuts, but I knew that was it. After that it was just a matter of time," said retired colonel Lawrence L. Tracy, a Latin America specialist from the Defense Department detailed to the Office of Public Diplomacy.

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega helped things along by disclosing that he made a visit to Moscow on April 28, four days after Congress had refused Reagan. Although the visit had been planned long in advance, it looked as though he were thumbing his nose at Congress.

House Minority Leader Robert H. Michel (R-Ill.) could see the opening. He asked for and got a meeting a few days later that included all the major administration players: Shultz, White House chief of staff Donald T. Regan, national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane, speechwriter Patrick J. Buchanan and top House Republicans.

"We said let's deal in the art of the possible," the GOP strategist said. The meeting drew up a package of nonlethal aid to contras that was dubbed "humanitarian," the strategist said. "If we hadn't done that, the contra aid would have died completely."

On June 12, 1985, the contras announced in El Salvador that they had formed the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) with a democratic political program. On the same day, the House narrowly approved \$27 million in nonlethal aid to the rebels, with the proviso that military aid would have a high priority the following spring. Michel went to the White House.

'A Nice Round Figure'

"He said he was tired of rounding up votes and telling people \$14 million would save the world. He said let's give 'em enough to win, and let's make a really major pitch. The \$100 million was a nice round figure," recalled Peter Flaherty, head of Citizens for Reagan.

Reagan agreed. He proposed an unrestricted \$70 million in military aid that the CIA could again manage, \$27 million in renewed humanitarian aid, and \$3 million for a human rights office to guarantee contra good behavior.

Reagan "came out charging" last spring, Flaherty said, making speech after speech that presented the issue as a choice between himself and Ortega.

The handwriting was on the wall. The House approved \$100 million in contra aid on June 25 by 221 to 209.

"The guys in the middle just got tired of being beaten up on by both sides," Barnes said. "They knew Reagan was going to come back and back and back on this. He was obsessed by it . . . He just wore everybody out."

The Reagan luck held in the Senate, where the Republican leadership was able to overcome a potentially deadly liberal filibuster against contra aid by tying it to economic sanctions against South Africa, which the liberals supported. It passed 53 to 47.

Congress had acquiesced to the military aid proposal, though the embrace was hardly enthusiastic. Renewal of the plan this year would have been a question mark in any case, but chances have been diminished with the Nov. 4 election of a Democratic-controlled Congress. The Iranian arms-contra aid scandal may have undercut the contras by association, according to House analysts.

But administration officials said they detect no sign yet that supporters are abandoning ship; the White House is determined to separate the scandal from the rebel cause and retain a program proponents still regard as crucial to U.S. strategic defense.

Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, said recently that the furor over private aid and diversion is irrelevant. "That period is over as of October anyway," Abrams said. "Now the U.S. government is funding the contras."

The first test of congressional sentiment is to occur Feb. 15, when the final \$40 million of the \$100 million is scheduled to be released. Congress could block disbursement with a joint resolution of disapproval, but it is subject to presidential veto, which in turn can be overridden by a two-thirds majority.

The debate is less than two months away.

A CONTRA CHRONOLOGY: RECENT HISTORY



Henry A. Kissinger



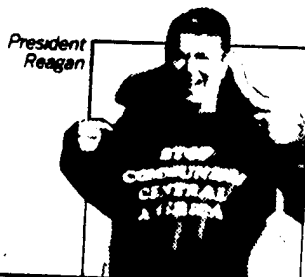
Anti-Sandinista rebel
in Nicaragua



Jose Napoleon Duarte



Daniel Ortega



President
Reagan

1983

MARCH: White House launches a public relations effort in support of the contras.

JULY: National Security Council creates a bipartisan commission to make recommendations for U.S. policy in Central America (the Kissinger Commission), and authorizes increased U.S. presence in the region. Later in the month, major troop exercises in Honduras are revealed. Congress reacts strongly.

JULY 28: First House vote to cut off aid to the contras.

NOVEMBER: Congress votes \$24 million in assistance to continue through mid-1984. This will be the last military aid authorized until October 1986.

1984

FEBRUARY: Central Intelligence Agency spearheads contra mining of Nicaraguan harbors.

MAY: Jose Napoleon Duarte is elected president of El Salvador, allowing the administration to turn its attention more fully to the situation in Nicaragua.

FALL 1984-SPRING 1985: Administration makes repeated, unsuccessful attempts to secure military aid for the contras.

1985

APRIL 24: House and Senate defeat a package of military aid for the contras.

APRIL 28: Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega visits Moscow.

MAY 1: U.S. imposes economic sanctions against Nicaragua.

JUNE 12: United Nicaraguan Opposition, the contras' political umbrella group, is formed. On the same day, the House approves \$27 million in humanitarian aid for the contras. The Senate votes its approval in August.

NOVEMBER: White House authorizes a major drive for \$100 million in military aid for contras.

1986

JUNE: House approves \$100 million in military aid. The Senate votes its approval in August.

COMPILED BY JAMES SCHWARTZ. GRAPHIC BY MARTY BARRICK—THE WASHINGTON POST