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Debate Has an Apocalyptic Tone

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It may have been through gritted teeth at times, but House members managed to call each other "gentlemen" yesterday as they shouted familiar arguments about Central America while the gavel banged often in a freewheeling debate on aid to Nicaraguan rebels.

"I don't expect this debate is going to change a single vote. I feel like Simon Bolivar plowing in the sea," Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.) said, referring to the 19th-century Latin American liberator who said, "Who seeks to govern Latin America plows the sea."

Nevertheless, Hyde was among the most fiery prophets of disaster if Congress rejects President Reagan's request for \$100 million in aid to the counterrevolutionaries, known as *contras*.

If the measure is defeated in today's vote, he said, wagging a finger toward the Democratic side of the aisle, "history is going to assign to you folks the role of pallbearers to democracy in Central America. And that's not McCarthyism, that's accountability."

Part of the gallery applauded, just as others there had applauded earlier when Rep. Ronald V. Dellums (D-Calif.) said he had "been re-baited, intimidated, harassed and harangued" for his opposition to the aid program. "We are not at war with the Nicaraguans," he said. "We have a better idea—democratic debate and the rule of law."

The chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), spoke for many critics when he said that, having spent \$100 million in U.S. aid since 1982, the *contras* have given the Nicaraguan government an excuse to increase repression even as the rebels hold no territory in Nicaragua and have no public support elsewhere in Latin America.

"These policies have not worked, and [Reagan] is asking us to expand that policy," Hamilton said.

One Republican critic, Rep. Stewart B. McKinney (Conn.), said, "We are, by our actions, by our statements, by our movements,

making more communists in Central America and Latin America than is possible for [Nicaraguan President Daniel] Ortega to make."

Several Democrats argued that the \$100 million could be better spent at home. "I can't go back to my district and tell people who can't get safe and sanitary and decent housing that we can't do that for you because we're sending \$100 million to the *contras*," said Rep. Parren J. Mitchell (D-Md.).

House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.) earlier called the decision "a Tonkin Gulf vote" that could lead to U.S. troops in Central America just as President Lyndon B. Johnson used the 1964 Tonkin Gulf resolution to send troops to Vietnam.

"I see this leading to war," O'Neill said. "I see a quagmire down there."

Rep. David R. Obey (D-Wis.) agreed, saying, "The United States of America, with our great tradition, should not be in the business of funding a grinding, low-level, dirty little war under conditions which at best we can play to a tie."

Aid supporters focused on abuses by Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista rulers and on their ties to the Soviet Union and Cuba.

Rep. Don Ritter (R-Pa.) started one heated exchange when he complained that Democrats "haven't said a single word about the Soviet threat." He asked Rep. James L. Oberstar (D-Minn.), "Is the gentleman concerned about Soviet and Cuban infiltration?"

Oberstar responded, "Why doesn't the gentleman ask to go to the source in Cuba and the Soviet Union?"

"Does the gentleman propose making war on Cuba and the Soviet Union?" Ritter shouted as the gavel pounded.

"That's what the gentleman is asking for," Oberstar shouted back.

Earlier, House Minority Leader Robert H. Michel (R-Ill.) rejected the argument that more aid means eventual U.S. troop involvement. "Let's put that notion to rest," he said.

Republicans argued that, on the contrary, sending more aid will prevent U.S. troop involvement later. Nicaragua is educating its young in revolution, said Rep. Danny L. Burton (R-Ind.). "Our children will have to face it five or 10 years down the road. They will have to fight an army of zealots," he said.

Rep. Elwood Hillis (R-Ind.) was one of many members who have had no previous visibility in the national debate but offered detailed arguments.

"It's no secret that the Nicaraguan communists have invited a substantial number of subversive groups to use that country as a base for their future operations," he said, naming East Germany, Bulgaria and Libya as well as Cuba and the Soviet Union.

The debate had its poetic moments. Rep. George W. Gekas (R-Pa.) quoted part of a popular song from the 1940s. "Managua, Nicaragua, is a wonderful spot—for terrorists and Soviet bases," he said.

Rep. Robert K. Dornan (R-Calif.) displayed sheaves of reports, mostly from the administration, defending the aid program. "I'll become an adjunct of the Government Printing Office" to get them out, he said. "Read it and weep, and vote with the president tomorrow," he added.

In a reference to recurring reports of pending compromise proposals, Rep. William B. Richardson (D-N.M.) urged that the House demand legislative language for any agreement rather than accept a letter or an executive order.

He said he erred last year in backing Reagan's request for \$27 million in aid on the strength of a letter of promises that have not been kept. "Beware of letters that don't mean anything," he said.