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Asst. Secretary Of State Elliott Abrams On U.S. Policy In Central America, Nicaragua, Contadora

by Deborah Tyroler

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During a Jan. 8 news conference in Washington, linking reporters in European cities and Montreal by satellite, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams said that while the contras cannot win the war against the Sandinista government, they may force the latter to the negotiating table. Abrams reiterated the Reagan administration's justification for contra aid: "The process of negotiation can succeed only through the pressure which the contras put on the Sandinista government. Without that pressure the Sandinistas won't negotiate and won't compromise." He said members of both parties in Congress now recognize the Sandinistas as a threat to US security. Consequently, he added, problems in obtaining additional money for the contras are not expected. Abrams claimed efforts by the Contadora Group were deadlocked, partly because South American governments were trying to force concessions from the four Central American democracies instead of trying "to crack the tough nut" of Nicaragua. Selected questions presented by reporters and Abrams' answers follow: Q: Don't you think there is a growing impatience in Central and Latin America regarding the deadlock [in negotiations]? Due to this growing impatience, don't you see a danger of new peace initiatives contradicting American goals and objectives in Central America? Abrams: I think there is more than impatience...there is tremendous fear of Nicaragua, of this heavily armed communist regime...[T]here is always a danger, not from Central America, but from South America, from Contadora, of unwise compromises with the Sandinistas, an effort to sign anything...that calls itself a peace treaty. But I do not think you will see that from Central America. Their necks are on the line, those four democracies...[I]f a bad peace treaty is signed, it is their national security and their freedom which is at stake. So while they are impatient and worried, they are not inclined to sign something that does not protect their interests. Q: How do you think the present composition of the US Congress and Iranagate will or will not weaken the present... objectives of the administration in Central America? Abrams: If we had been asked whether we prefer to have maintained Republican control of the Senate, we would not have had to hesitate in answering that question. This whole scandal also is a problem, but is a problem whose seriousness is exaggerated. If you look at why the Democratic House of Representatives last year approved aid to the contras, they recite why. They say, 'Nicaraguan subversion of its neighbors; Nicaragua's aggression; Nicaragua's support for terrorism; the internal repression, the Cubans and Soviets'...All that is still true. Republicans and Democrats...still have to confront what is for us a real national security problem, a second Cuba, this time on the mainland of the Americas...Those Senators and Congressmen have to go home, and they have to tell the voters what they did about the question of a second Cuba on the mainland of the Americas. Q: [In reference to the joint mission by Contadora and Support Group foreign ministers and the secretaries general of the UN and OAS scheduled for Jan. 16-20...], such a joint mission could propose the establishment of a multi-national observer force to monitor troop movements along the Nicaraguan and Honduran frontier. What would be the position of the US government on such a proposal? Abrams: You will never achieve peace in Central America by picking up one little thing here and another little thing there. The road to peace lies through democracy. Don't give up on democracy in Nicaragua. Do

not abandon the people of Nicaragua to communism; that will not produce peace. They will go on fighting. They will go on fighting forever because they don't want to live as part of the Soviet empire... The answer is to get the Sandinistas to have free elections and freedom of speech and freedom of expression and freedom of movement...There is no military answer. There is a political answer, and it is democracy. Q: You mentioned the need to pressure Nicaragua to stop aggression and subversion in other countries. Could you mention some recent and well-proven examples for such subversion and aggression? Abrams: Well, I can't give you details because that would be revealing classified information. I don't know of anybody in the US Congress who really thinks anymore that [the Sandinistas] are not supporting the FMLN in El Salvador. We know for a fact that they are also supporting the communist guerrillas in Guatemala and Honduras and Costa Rica. We know for a fact about their support of the M-19 in Colombia. None of this is new. They just invaded Honduras six weeks ago...The question is: what is to be done about it? That is the issue. Q: Why has the US government refused to participate in bilateral negotiations with Nicaragua since 1982? Abrams: Our position on this is crystal clear...Secretary Shultz went to Managua. We had nine rounds of discussions with the government of Nicaragua...And we said to them at the outset, 'If you try to use these as a substitute for Contadora and refuse to negotiate with your neighbors and with the people of Nicaragua, then we will cut them off.' That is exactly what the Sandinistas did...So we [stopped] those talks... The day that the Sandinistas agree to sit down with the democratic resistance forces...we sit down with the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas don't want to do that. Q: The position of the United States toward the contras is well known. What is the position of the United States towards the civilian opposition in Nicaragua since some leaders... oppose the Sandinistas [but are also] opposed to US funding of the contras? Abrams: We believe in democratic politick. And therefore, we are strongly supportive of anybody attempting to engage in free democratic politics in Nicaragua, including all of the opposition groups, whether we happen to agree with their particular policies or not... If I can engage here in a criticism of Europe. I don't think you support them strongly enough... Support from us might well hurt them because the government of Nicaragua will then say, 'You see? They are all involved with the contras.' But you can do it. You government and your political parties can support the democratic political opposition in Nicaragua... Q: As far as President Reagan's policy toward Nicaragua is concerned, the President now has less than two years to bring his crusade to a happy end. Do you estimate that the Sandinista government...has any chance to survive the president's mandate? Abrams: There are variables. The level of Soviet and Cuban aid, for example, is a variable which is not under US control and which has a lot to do with the survival of that regime. Secondly, Congress. What is the [future] level of assistance given by Congress to the [contras]?...I would say that if the current US policy is maintained, it seems to me the Sandinistas will not survive. Either they will be forced to compromise, [or] the Nicaraguan people will rise up and get rid of them, just as the Nicaraguan people got rid of...the Somoza dictatorship. Q: It seems that so far the contras have not been able to gain the support of the local populations in the regions bordering Honduras and Costa Rica. How do you explain this situation? Abrams: Absolutely wrong. I can't prove what I am going to say to you and you can't prove the contrary here on a television show. But first, there are no elections in those areas; so we don't really know...Do you know that in those areas where the contras have been most active over the years...the Sandinistas move people out forcibly...? I think that is a clear indication that there is tremendous popular support. And why not? Name me a country in which the people have freely chosen communism... Q: What does the American government really expect from the contras, representing a political world which is going to disappear [throughout] Latin America? I believe that the contras are something coming from the older political system in Nicaragua. Abrams: You are wrong. The leaders of the contras are... Cruz,

Calero, and Robelo. Cruz was a member of the Sandinista government...Robelo was a member of the Sandinista I should say the kind of united front government which succeeded Somoza a long time. Calero was jailed by Somoza. So the contra forces let us say 15,000 have an average age of about 18 or 19 or 20. They are Somocistas? How old were they when Somoza was in power? Thirteen? This is nonsense. The people of Nicaragua started to rise up. This is the largest and fastest-growing insurgency I can think of in the world...And it is for a very simple reason. It had nothing to do with Somoza. The people of Nicaragua don't want communism. Nobody has ever chosen communism freely... Q: You said before that the Nicaraguan people hate the Sandinista government. It seems to me there is not enough to confirm this. There are not mass demonstrations, nothing like that...in the streets of Managua. How do you know, did you take a poll, for example? Abrams: How do you know what popular opinion is in Hungary? I think I know that the people of Hungary want democracy, not communism. I cannot prove it to you. How many mass demonstrations have there been recently in Hungary or Czechoslovakia?...You have to understand that the people of Nicaragua are dealing with a new, now consolidating communist secret police system. The reason those Czechs and East Germans and Cuban secret police people are there is to train a new communist secret police apparatus. If you read the reports of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the OAS or of the International League for Human Rights, which is the oldest US human rights group, they will tell you about secret prisons and murder and torture by the government of Nicaragua. So people in Nicaragua know what happens when you rise up and demonstrate...If you do a little bit, you may lose your ration coupon and then your children starve. If you do more than that, then you disappear one day. Maybe you turn up a few days later simply having been beaten or having had your children threatened. Why do you think there are hundreds of thousands of refugees from Nicaragua? Why are all these people fleeing Nicaragua? If the government of Nicaragua has widespread popular support why does it shut down Radio Catolica? Why does it expel Bishop Vega? Why does it close down La Prensa? Why does it have a state of emergency which destroys civil liberties?... That...government knows it has no popular support. That is why they are being so repressive. Just like every communist government, they all know they have no popular support... Q: Switzerland, like many other European nations, is giving assistance to Nicaragua for humanitarian and development projects. What is your opinion on this assistance? Abrams: If you are going to give aid to Nicaragua, we hope that you very carefully look... at where the aid is going to be sure that it is purely and exclusively humanitarian, that it does not go to so-called communal farms that in fact are military bases. Q: If a negotiated solution is not found in Central America, is American military intervention a likelihood or only a possibility? Abrams: I think that if no compromise is found, the people of Nicaragua will rise up, as they rose up in 1979, to destroy their most recent dictatorship. I think there are as happened under President Kennedy times when the United States might be forced to prevent Soviet intervention by using its own military power...What I see...is that this hated communist regime is going to have to deal with the people of Nicaragua. If it refuses, if its only answer to the people is repression, they are going to get rid of it. Q: How do you think history will judge the eight years of Reagan policy in Central America? Abrams: I think the Reagan legacy will be first to have supported the creation of democracies and the sustenance of those democracies...and secondly, to have supported the people of Nicaragua in their struggle for freedom against communism, [and] that this struggle will succeed.

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