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Summary Of Divisions Within Reagan Administration On Appropriate Posture Vis-a-vis Guatemala Peace Accord

by Deborah Tyroler

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August 11: A White House official told the NEW YORK TIMES that the Central American peace plan has put the administration's plans to convince Congress to appropriate more aid to the contras "on the back burner." Even though the regional accord does not address some of the most difficult problems and faces enormous obstacles, it has already succeeded in drawing the focus of the debate away from Washington to Central America, White House and State Department officials acknowledged. "Everything dealing with the contra aid package is definitely on the back burner," said the White House official, who declined to be named. "To a certain extent, everyone is waiting to see what happens next." Even before the accord was announced, Tom Loeffler, who is a leader in the administration effort to win aid for the contras was not optimistic. He was quoted last week as saying that after looking at the votes and talking to lawmakers in both parties, "It was obvious that the likelihood would be a defeat." It was this realization, he said, that prompted Reagan and Wright to come forward with their bipartisan peace plan. That proposal was overtaken by the accord devised in Guatemala City. White House officials acknowledged that the administration will be unable to move ahead with any aid proposal to the contras at least until after the five Central American foreign ministers meet on August 23 to discuss the difficult process of how to carry out their plan. "We want to give these negotiations the opportunity to move forward," one official said. "Beyond that things have yet to be determined." White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater would not say if the US would wait for the regional peace plan to develop before requesting new aid for the contras. He cited an agreement worked out with Wright not to discuss the aid issue while the peace process was going on. Fitzwater's reluctance only added to the confusion about administration intentions to seek renewed aid. State Department spokesman Charles Redman acknowledged that the peace plan by the Central American leaders supersedes the proposal by Reagan. He said, "What we're working with now is the plan arrived at by the presidents in Guatemala City." He added, "There are probably lots of ideas in the Reagan plan that are still applicable and would be interesting subjects of discussion as they work out these details." August 12: Mexican newspaper EXCELSIOR reported that US ambassador in Mexico, Charles J. Pilliod, insisted that there will be no direct dialogue between the US and Nicaragua, and reaffirmed that Washington will continue aiding the contras "until we see a demonstration of democracy in Nicaragua." According to Pilliod, the signing of the peace accord in Guatemala constituted a sign of "progress," and that the US has always supported negotiations in Central America. Rep. Jack Kemp (R-NY) called the Central American peace proposal "a dead end for freedom" and urged Reagan to submit a new request to Congress for at least \$210 million in military aid for the contras. August 13: The White House is planning to ask Congress next month to provide additional military aid to the contras, should peace talks falter in the weeks ahead. Reportedly, a major purpose of seeking additional aid would be to protect the contras from September 30 to November 7, the deadline envisioned in the peace plan for a cease-fire in Nicaragua. One official told the NEW YORK TIMES that the administration had always planned to seek more aid next month. "Our current plan is still go up in September," the official said. The comments on August 13 marked

a change in tone and direction by the administration, which has been criticized by conservatives for having announced its own plan for Central America last week in cooperation with Jim Wright. Two days later, the Central American presidents signed the Costa Rican-sponsored plan, which differs in important ways (to Washington) from the Reagan-Wright plan. Wright and the State Department have both said that the Central American plan had become the focus of their attention. Other officials were quoted as saying that military aid to the contras was on the "back burner" because of uncertainty over how the peace talks would progress. However, on the 13th, the White House took direct issue with those statements. Asked if the White House now saw the Arias plan as pre-eminent, one official said, "We have not agreed with that characterization." "We feel like the agreement was made last week is still the operative agreement," a White House official said. That agreement, he added "leaves clearly in place a deadline." In the White House view, the original Regan-Wright plan still guides its policies. In particular, that means that the White House considers September 30 to be the deadline for democratic changes in Nicaragua. "We've got an interregnum that we're going to have to deal with," a senior administration official said. Other officials have said that the contras have enough money and supplies to carry them into November. Wright, in an interview earlier in the week, said the president had promised him he would not ask for military aid until after the September 30 deadline. He and other Democrats actively involved in the Central American peace plan discussions declined comment on the White House's remarks. The White House is clearly annoyed at Wright's quick embrace of the Arias plan and alarmed at attacks from conservatives who accuse the administration of selling out the contras. "We clearly want to send a message that the president has not walked away from the contras," a senior official said. He noted that this growing concern within the White House was responsible for the insertion at the last moment of a sentence in the president's speech in North Platte, Nebraska, declaring: "We have always been willing to talk - we have never been willing to abandon those who are fighting for democracy and freedom." One administration official referred to the contras several times as an "insurance policy" against delay and deceit by the Sandinistas. "We plan to address the funding issue in a way that will insure that support for the contras continues until we are all satisfied that there is a peace plan that will insure the peaceful reintegration and democratization of Nicaragua," he said. He added that the administration's "game plan" was not yet final. But he indicated that one possibility was a suggestion by Senate Minority leader Robert Dole (R-Kans.) that aid be granted on a conditional basis, pending the outcome of the talks. In his speech in North Platte, Reagan said that any peace plan "must be consistent with the interests of the US and must be consistent with the interests of those fighting for freedom in Nicaragua." In these comments, the president was clearly trying to distance himself from specifics of the Arias plan and leave open the possibility that he might reject an accord reached by the Central American leaders. August 14: The White House reassured House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Tex.) that Reagan will not request more military or humanitarian aid for the contras before September 30. Meanwhile, Washington's special envoy to Central America, Philip Habib, resigned. (See story on Habib resignation, this issue.) Administration officials, including national security adviser Frank Carlucci and White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater told Wright and others that what happens after September 30 depends entirely "on the process of democratization" in Nicaragua. The current appropriation of \$100 million for the contras expires September 30, while a cease-fire in the Nicaraguan conflict is not scheduled before November 7, according to the Central American presidents' peace plan. White House officials said the conflicting signals reflected administration responses to conflicting pressures. "Conservatives are worried that the president will abandon the contras, while liberals are concerned that he is not serious about a peace plan," a senior White House official said. "We're

trying to walk a middle ground." Another official said Reagan is "under heavy pressure from his own right wing." A group of conservatives, many of them longtime Reagan supporters, met with Reagan in the White House before his vacation and urged him to reaffirm support for the contras. Fitzwater reflected on the conflicting pressures as he briefed reporters on August 14, saying that "the conservative leadership in this country have very strong feelings, liberal Democrats have very strong feelings...there are also strong pressures coming out of Central America." He added that "the president is the anchor in this and his position has been the same from the beginning, and that is that the Wright-Reagan plan represents the principles that we believe in and are important for peace in Central America." The Central American countries rejected this plan in Guatemala City and adopted a Costa Rican proposal that differs in several important respects. The most important difference, from the White House point of view, is that the Wright-Reagan plan would require the Nicaraguan government to show evidence of democratization by September 30. August 14: According to the NEW YORK TIMES, Reagan's Central American peace plan, proposed in part to demonstrate that the administration was moving forward after the Iran-contra hearings, is instead causing the White House nothing but difficulty. Last week, the presidents of the five Central American nations virtually ignored Reagan's proposal and approved a plan of their own that left the White House wondering how to reconcile the two. In Washington, senior officials have been arguing in public and private over what the administration should do. Trying to resolve the disputes, the White House announced August 13 that it was planning to request renewed aid next month for the contras if peace negotiations faltered. That only seemed to complicate matters and forced another clarification by the White House on the following day. The troubles began on August 4 when Reagan in collaboration with Jim Wright, offered a peace plan that was considered a shrewd political stroke at the time. Administration officials said then that they fully expected the Nicaraguan government to reject it. But White House officials said they were offering it because they thought prospects for getting more aid to the contras from Congress would improve if the Sandinistas refused to negotiate. Aides said they also believed the announcement of the plan would confuse the meeting of the Central American presidents in Guatemala two days later and probably scuttle their attempt to agree on a peace plan of their own that most administration officials considered unacceptable. In the end, however, hardly anything turned out as expected. Just as happened the last time the White House offered a plan for ending the conflict in Central America, in 1985, Reagan's latest proposal has so far caused only confusion and conflict, both in the US and abroad. The affirmation on August 13 of plans to request renewed military aid for the contras, officials said, was in large part an attempt to quell political difficulties caused by the Reagan peace plan at home. But even that backfired, prompting White House officials to try to clarify the situation. Concerned that the statement might anger Democrats who had supported the Reagan plan, the White House said it would not seek more aid before September 30, when authority to finance the contras expires. In Washington, Reagan's plan angered both the left and the right. Liberals called it a ploy to get more contra aid, and conservatives complained to the President that it sold the contras down the river. Wright, who took a considerable political risk by joining Reagan as co-author of the plan, felt stung almost immediately when he learned that the White House had, without consulting him, distributed a 21-point explanatory addendum that included provisions he did not accept. The addendum includes one point that would bind Congress to approve non-military aid to the contras next fall. And far from wrecking the meeting of the Central American presidents, officials from the region said, word that Washington had proposed a peace treaty in cooperation with Wright turned out to be an important development prompting the presidents to reach an agreement after years of debate. August 15: In his weekly radio address, President Reagan said that US support for the

contras should continue until "a cease-fire has occurred and a verifiable process of democratization is underway." The president's statement further complicates an already confusing situation as talks are beginning under the Central American peace accord. Nicaraguan leaders have argued that if the US continues to aid the contras, the whole peace effort would be jeopardized. But Reagan insists that aid should continue until it is clear that Managua is "serious about peace." (Basic data from several reports by NEW YORK TIMES, WASHINGTON POST)

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