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Summary: Criticism Mounts Of Reagan's Apparent Disinterest In Peaceful Resolution Of Cenam Conflict

by Deborah Tyroler

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Doubts about President Reagan's commitment to achieving a regional peace agreement have been voiced recently by Central American supporters of the plan put forward by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias and agreed to by five Central American presidents at an Aug. 7 meeting in Guatemala City. Criticism also has come from House Speaker Jim Wright (D- Tex.), and a group of House members. In an interview last week with the WASHINGTON POST (09/18/87) Wright made clear that his arrangements with Reagan for a bipartisan approach have been strained close to the breaking point by what he regards as the administration's "active opposition" to the peace talks. Central American diplomats were disappointed by the administration's spurning of their pleas not to raise the contra aid issue before the Nov. 7 deadline set in Guatemala for working out a cease-fire and by Reagan's statements Sept. 12 that the Arias plan is insufficient to force the "complete democratization" of Nicaragua. Wright told reporters Sept. 17 that his talks with Central American leaders recently have given him cause for cautious optimism that a cease-fire accord could be reached before Nov. 7. In a US NEWS & WORLD REPORT interview earlier this month, Reagan said the contras must be supported until there is an agreement guaranteeing "complete democratization" of Nicaragua. The president's critics say the implication is that the administration, which formerly sought to overthrow the Sandinistas by force, is offering them the alternative of agreeing at the bargaining table to accept a US-dictated model of how Nicaragua should be governed. Costa Rican Foreign Minister Rodrigo Madrigal Nieto told reporters in Washington earlier this month that recent statements by the Reagan administration strongly suggest that Washington is unwilling to accept, under any conditions, a marxist government in Central America. Such a goal, he said, ignores reality. "The Sandinista leaders are Marxists," he said. "They make no secret of that. They are proud of it. They are not going to stand aside and turn the country into the kind of democracy the Reagan administration wants." "However," Madrigal continued, "we believe the opportunity now exists where the Sandinistas will accept certain democratic measures called for in the Arias plan greater freedom of the press, independent political parties, guarantees of civil rights that will provide the beginnings of an infrastructure that cannot be easily dismantled and that can be built upon." Other critics charge that the administration, with its insistence on "complete democratization," is attempting to hold Nicaragua to a higher standard than it applies to Washington's allies in the region. Of the four countries engaged with Nicaragua in the Arias plan, only Costa Rica has a long-established tradition of democracy. The others El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala have been ruled through most of their histories by military dictatorships. While they currently have democratically elected governments, the civilian leaders hold office only at the sufferance of the armed forces; and all three have been plagued by charges that the military and police have committed and continue to commit human-rights violations and other offenses against democratic rule. Wright, in the interview, recalled that the Aug. 5 plan on which he collaborated with Reagan set forth three "legitimate concerns" of the United States: that there be no communist-bloc bases in Nicaragua, that Nicaragua pose no military or subversive threat to its neighbors and that the Nicaraguan government guarantee the rights and liberties set forth in its constitution,

including "free, orderly elections." However, Wright added that, at his insistence, this was followed by a paragraph written by him and stating in part: "Beyond this, the United States has no right to influence or determine the identity of the political leaders of Nicaragua nor the social and economic system of the country. These are matters wholly within the right of the Nicaraguan people." Wright said he believes the Arias plan contains adequate provision for dealing with these concerns. Wright, who long was generally supportive of Reagan's Central America policies, said he is taking his current tack of "talking about peace and not about war or aid to the contras" because his contacts with a wide range of Central Americans, including Nicaraguans, have made him optimistic that the Sandinistas might be ready for an agreement that will resolve many US regional concerns. In the past, negative signals from Washington have been sufficient to scuttle moves toward a Central American peace accord. The question now is whether such observers as Wright and Madrigal are correct in saying that the process might be gathering a momentum that will make it more difficult for the administration to hold a peace agreement hostage to renewed contra aid or to Nicaraguan acceptance of the full package of US "democratization" demands. [At a breakfast meeting with reporters on Sept. 17, Wright characterized Reagan as a mediocre chief executive who "willfully" ignores facts that don't conform to his preconceived notions of reality. He described the president as a "charming person, a well-meaning person, not an evil person," but one who "hasn't the faintest idea of the contents of legislation or the application of real facts to real problems." Asked if Reagan is a good president, Wright said without hesitation, "No." "He's smart but he's ignorant of the facts a president ought to know, and willfully so," said the speaker.] Sept. 21: In a letter to President Reagan, 15 members of the House accused him of attempting to undermine the Central American peace plan by seeking to renew contra aid. The letter said that after promising support for the Aug. 7 accord, the White House has done nothing but criticize it and request more contra aid, while the contras continue their ineffective war against the Nicaraguan government. (Basic data from AP, 09/21/87)

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