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Notes On Congressional Approval Of Non-military Aid For Nicaraguan Contras

by Deborah Tyroler
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On April 13, the House voted 309 to 110, and the Senate 89 to 9 for approval of $66.6 million in non-military aid to maintain the Nicaraguan contras in their Honduran camps through February 1990 when elections in Nicaragua are scheduled. The legislation provides $49.8 million in direct humanitarian aid food, clothing, shelter, medical assistance, nonmilitary training and replacement batteries for communications equipment. The administration agreed not to provide aid to any contra forces engaged in fighting or human rights abuses. The bill permits the administration to continue controversial direct payments of cash to contra leaders and fighters. The remainder of the money would go for transportation of the aid ($7.7 million), medical aid for civilian war victims ($4.2 million) and operational expenses of the Agency for International Development ($5 million).

In the House, the bill was supported by 152 Democrats and 157 Republicans, and opposed by 99 Democrats and 11 Republicans. In the Senate, 50 Democrats and 39 Republicans voted for the bill. Four Democrats and five Republicans voted against it. The votes against were cast by Brock Adams (D-Wash.), Bill Bradley (D-NJ), Dan Coats (R-Ind.), Alan Cranston (D-Calif.), Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), Jesse Helms (R-NC), Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) and Malcolm Wallop (R-Wyo.). The House defeated 329 to 94 a motion by Rep. Robert K. Dornan (R-Calif.) to delete the Nov. 30 cutoff provision and to allow expedited consideration of any request for military aid. Some liberal Democrats, led by Rep. Barbara Boxer of California, brought to the Capitol Nicaraguan citizens described as victims of contra atrocities. These Democrats opposed any type of aid to the contras, and described the bill as an expensive way to allow President Bush to extricate himself from a foreign policy embarrassment. The liberal Democrats said that the contras should be disbanded and that the money should be used to shelter homeless people in the US, rather than homeless contras in Honduras. Rep. James A. Traficant (D-OH) said, "It's time to send humanitarian assistance to Cleveland and Detroit, to Chicago, Pittsburgh and Youngstown." Another Democrat, Rep. John Lewis of Georgia, said his constituents needed money for housing, education and health care. According to Secretary of State James Baker congressional approval of the aid package for the Nicaraguan contras in Honduras will "put the United States back in the ballgame in Central America" and will test whether the Soviet Union is willing to help resolve regional tensions. In testimony before a Senate Appropriations subcommittee on April 12, Baker said the accord he developed alongside congressional leaders would press the Nicaraguan government to keep its promise of democratic elections. Next, he said, the US plan will show whether Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's "so-called `new thinking" extends to the Western Hemisphere. "This bipartisan accord keeps the resistance intact and in existence for possible use down the line," he said. "When you hear the screams that came from the Sandinistas when this agreement was announced, you've got to believe that keeping the resistance in force is indeed some incentive for better performance." According to Baker, "There is another government which must answer a question posed by the democratic community in Latin America. Will the Soviet Union keep its promise to the people of Central America to support the peace process? Will the Soviet Union...halt aid to Cuba and Nicaragua that provides weapons, ammunition and training for marxist guerrillas in..."
El Salvador?" [Ed. note: There is no evidence that the Nicaraguan government has provided military assistance of any kind to the Salvadoran rebels for the past several years. There is no conclusive evidence that the Cuban government provides weapons to the Salvadoran rebels.] Baker said the Soviets continue to insist on what he called the "nonstarter" position that the US must also halt military aid to its allies in Central America. (Basic data from Washington Post, 04/13/89, 04/14/89; New York Times, 04/14/89)

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