6-14-1989

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Bush Administration Considers Use Of Secret Intelligence Operations To Support "democratic Opposition" In Nicaragua

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Category/Department: General
Published: Wednesday, June 14, 1989

The Bush administration is considering the use of secret intelligence operations as part of a review of how the US could best support the democratic process and the "democratic opposition" in Nicaragua. Unidentified administration officials cited by the New York Times (06/11/89) said that they might want to provide secret contributions or political guidance to opposition leaders if the Sandinistas attempted electoral fraud. Congressional efforts to prohibit the CIA from engaging in operations to influence the 1990 elections are facing vigorous opposition by the administration. Under federal law, while the president is required to inform the House and Senate intelligence committees of "any significant anticipated intelligence activity," the committees' approval is not required. The committees may try to persuade the administration to revise or cancel an operation. In addition, Congress may withhold funding from a project or pass legislation explicitly prohibiting it. Unidentified administration officials told the Times they feared that Congress would tie their hands by prohibiting covert activities in the election campaign, and then criticize the administration for not doing enough to help defeat the Sandinistas in the election. Many congresspersons assert that any US aid to the Nicaraguan opposition should be publicly debated and disclosed in the US. Their preferred route is through the National Endowment for Democracy, a private non-profit corporation that receives almost all its funding from the federal government. The Times reported that the House permanent Select Committee on Intelligence is preparing a bill to authorize CIA programs in the coming year. Several members of Congress have sent letters to the committee chairperson, Rep. Anthony C. Beilenson, asserting that the bill should explicitly prohibit CIA efforts to influence the Nicaraguan elections. For instance, Rep. Jim Moody (D-Wisc.), wrote: "A large-scale CIA campaign would not remain covert for long and, once disclosed, would compromise the integrity of the electoral process." This letter was signed by Moody and two other Democrat members of the House, Bruce A. Morrison (Conn.) and Peter H. Kostmeyer (Penn.). In another letter to Beilenson, Democrat members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Latin America endorsed a prohibition on CIA covert actions, saying, "The United States should do nothing that would interfere with or undermine the prospects for free and fair elections in Nicaragua." At a recent congressional hearing, Michael G. Kozak, Acting Asst. Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, was asked four times for assurance that the CIA would not be involved in the Nicaraguan elections. He refused to answer the question. Kozak told Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) that a public hearing is "just not the appropriate forum to be talking about whether the agency is involved in anything or not involved in anything." Congress has already appropriated $2 million to the Endowment for use in "promoting democracy" in Nicaragua. During the week of June 5, the Senate passed a bill that would provide $3 million in additional funds for the Endowment to spend in Nicaragua. The House is expected to endorse the bill. (Basic data from New York Times, 06/11/89)