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Bush Administration Considers Contributing $3 Million To Nicaraguan Opposition Presidential Campaign

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Sept. 9, the Washington Post reported that the White House is considering making a $3 million campaign contribution to Nicaraguan opposition candidate Violeta Barrios Chamorro. Unidentified sources told the Post that President Bush is debating whether to channel the funds overtly through the federal government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, or covertly through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Democrats in Congress would strongly oppose resuming covert CIA activities in Nicaragua. The Endowment's internal rules under 1985 federal legislation prohibit giving money to candidates or parties for election purposes. The sources pointed out, however, that Congress could authorize the Endowment to make an exception to that rule. Fifty percent of all foreign funding for parties or candidates in Nicaragua must go to the Supreme Electoral Council, created by the government to help defray the costs of the elections. The sources told the Post that the Bush administration would therefore have to ask Congress for $6 million if it decided to "overtly" contribute to Barrios de Chamorro's campaign. On Sept. 10 in statements to the New York Times unidentified officials confirmed the Post report. The Times reported that several officials who worked on the plan said they were unfamiliar with the federal law prohibiting campaign contributions by the Endowment. Unidentified State Department officials cited by the Times said they had not decided whether to ask Congress to rewrite the law or to pass special legislation making an exception. In an interview with the Times, Sally Shelton-Colby, a member of the Endowment board of directors, said, "We should support the democratic process, rather than a specific political party." She said she would favor legislation to permit aid to opposition parties only if it was clear that such assistance was "essential to the survival of democracy in Nicaragua." Congress has appropriated $3.5 million for the Endowment's use in Nicaragua for the fiscal year ending Sept. 30. Endowment president Carl Gershman said that money was being used "to strengthen democratic institutions, processes and values in Nicaragua," but not to finance any specific campaigns. The $3 million being considered by the Bush administration at present is in addition to that amount. Sen. Christopher J. Dodd (D-CT), chairperson of the Foreign Relations subcommittee on Latin America, was cited by the Times (09/13/89) as saying that the use of the Endowment to support opposition candidates "would virtually destroy its credibility "by turning it into an international political action committee." In an editorial appearing in the Times (09/13/89), David K. Shipler, a senior associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, asserted that such funding would "cross the line" between US support for the democratic process and support for specific parties. He wrote that the proposal to provide Barrios de Chamorro's campaign with $3.5 million "looks more like US intervention to change a government than to change a political system." (Basic data from Washington Post, AFP, 09/09/89; New York Times, 09/11/89, 09/13/89)