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On Congressional Debate Of Bush Administration's $9 Million Aid Request For Nicaraguan Elections

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Sept. 29 at a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Asst. Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Bernard W. Aronson was unable to explain why the State Department wanted to spend $815,000 in salaries and $1.3 million on "vehicles" for members of the Nicaraguan opposition working on next February's elections. Aronson described the $9 million proposal as "a modest program" to assist democratic forces in "a David versus Goliath fight." He insisted that time was running short, since voter registration was scheduled to begin Oct. 1, and to continue for the following three Sundays. Rep. David Obey (D-Wisc.), chairperson of the House Appropriations subcommittee responsible for foreign aid, said, "we still have minimal information from the administration about the specifics" of its plan. Aides to Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC) apparently expressed concern that the money would subsidize the Communist Party of Nicaragua, one of 14 parties belonging to the opposition alliance that nominated Violeta Barrios de Chamorro for president. Carl Gershman, president of the National Endowment for Democracy, acknowledged that Bush's proposal to send $5 million through his organization to Nicaragua "dwarfs what the endowment has been able to spend" on elections in Panama, Chile, the Philippines or any other country. The NED is a private nonprofit corporation that receives almost all its funding from Washington. [On Sept. 15, the NED board of directors approved $1.5 million in grants for Nicaragua. That money is separate from the $9 million requested for the fiscal year 1990.] Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT), chairperson of the Foreign Relations subcommittee on Latin America, said the administration was proposing to spend $5 for every potential voter in Nicaragua's electorate of 1.8 million people. "We all want to help. But just coming up here and saying 'I want nine million bucks and I can't tell you how it's going to be spent, where it's going to be used,' is totally unacceptable." Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-RI), chairperson of the Foreign Relations Committee, asked Aronson if Bush was planning any "covert operations" to influence the Nicaraguan elections. Aronson declined to answer, saying such questions should be discussed behind closed doors by the congressional intelligence panels. Paul S. Reichler, a Washington lawyer who represents the government of Nicaragua, criticized the administration proposal as "an attempt to buy the election" for Barrios de Chamorro. On Oct. 3, during a hearing of the House Rules Committee, the Bush administration for the first time stated that the CIA will not engage in covert operations to influence the outcome of the February 1990 Nicaraguan elections. The Committee was considering a bill to provide money for US intelligence agencies in the coming year. Rep. Anthony Beilenson (D-Calif.), chairperson of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, said the bill "authorizes no funds whatsoever" for secret efforts to influence the elections. In addition, he said, "The administration has pledged that it will not seek covert funds" to influence the vote. Beilenson implied that the committee had shut down on secret contingency funds to conduct political operations in Nicaragua without congressional approval. He said the administration could get money for such operations only by seeking approval from the House and Senate Appropriations and Intelligence Committees. Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), ranking Republican on the Intelligence Committee confirmed the arrangement: "The administration has agreed not to request covert aid for the election activities of
the internal Nicaraguan democratic opposition. It has chosen to seek overt assistance to support a democratic election process aimed at helping to compel the Sandinistas to permit largely free and fair elections." Congress reportedly insisted on such assurances as a condition for providing money openly to encourage democratic elections in Nicaragua. On Oct. 3, the House Appropriations Committee approved a bill that would provide up to $9 million in aid for registering voters and monitoring the vote in Nicaragua. Most of the money would be channeled through the NED. About $400,000 are earmarked for election monitoring activities by former President Jimmy Carter and his organization, the Council of Freely Elected Heads of Government. The committee stipulated that the "funds are not to be used for cash payments to individuals for political purposes, or to finance the campaigns of candidates for public office." According to Cindy M. Buhl, legislative director of Pax Americas, a political action committee seeking negotiated settlements in Central America, "The administration was forced to bend to the will of Congress and renounce the use of covert activities in the Nicaraguan electoral process." The House is scheduled to vote on the $9 million aid bill on Oct. 4. The bill is likely to be approved, since the House Democratic leadership has expressed support. Next, on Oct. 5, the House is scheduled to vote on HR 2748, the FY 1990 Intelligence Authorizations Bill. Critics point out that while the bill does not authorize new funds for covert aid to the Nicaraguan opposition and does not allow use of contingency funds in Nicaragua, it also does not contain an explicit prohibition on covert operations. [Ed. note: As pointed out by Jim Burchell, of the Northeast Regional Quest for Peace organization, $3.5 million already appropriated by Congress to promote "democratic elections" in Nicaragua is equivalent to 0.175% of Nicaragua's gross domestic product of $2 billion in 1987. Proportional spending by a foreign government on US elections would come to $7.875 billion (of US 1987 GNP, $4.5 trillion). Adding the proposed $9 million to the previous $3.5 million, totals $12.5 million, or 0.625% of Nicaraguan GDP. An equivalent proportion of US GNP would be $28.175 billion.] [Basic data from 09/29/89, 09/30/89, 10/03/89 reports by Nicaragua Network (Washington, DC); New York Times, 09/30/89, 10/04/89]