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Senate Approves $9 Million Nicaraguan Election Aid Package

by Deborah Tyroler

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On the evening of Oct. 17, the Senate voted 64 to 35 to send $9 million to assist Nicaraguan opposition parties in the February 1990 election, and to pay for monitoring activities by US observers. President Bush, top administration officials and the presidential candidate of the National Opposition Union (UNO), Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, made last-minute appeals to senators. The bill was earlier approved by the House. Some liberal Democrat senators argued that the US had no business meddling in the elections of a sovereign country. A few conservatives, including Jesse Helms (R-NC), were opposed to the funding because half of foreign contributions to political parties or candidates under Nicaraguan law must go to the Supreme Electoral Council to help defray overall electoral expenses. According to the New York Times, some of the money is earmarked for observer teams such as one headed by former President Jimmy Carter, and up to $5 million will go to independent or opposition political, press, labor or other groups to monitor or support the election process via the National Endowment for Democracy. The remaining $4 million will include money to support UNO. UNO has said it would use more than $1 million for trucks, staff, air-conditioners for political headquarters and other administrative expenses. Sen. Brock Adams (D-Wash.) said he did not understand why the US should bankroll the Nicaraguan opposition's campaign. He noted that he had run "a bare-bones campaign" in his own re-election. Critics have pointed out for several weeks that US law prohibits foreign contributions to the Democratic or Republican party. Sen. Dale Bumpers (D-Ark.) said that meanwhile, the Bush administration advocates "publicly financing an election in Nicaragua." The Times cited supporters who said there was no comparison between "the campaign laws of an established democracy and the effort in Nicaragua of opposition parties to run against an authoritarian Government." Supporters won a crucial vote earlier in the day to cut off debate, 74-25, and then defeated several amendments that would have gutted the bill. Notimex cited White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater telling reporters in Washington that Violeta Barrios de Chamorro "is our candidate." The US, he said, wants to provide financial assistance to UNO because the February elections constitute the "last" opportunity for democracy in Nicaragua. Of the total $9 million, said Fitzwater, $5 million would go to NED to support the electoral process. Another $2 million would go to Barrios de Chamorro's election campaign. The remaining $2 million would go to the Supreme Electoral Council, in accordance with Nicaraguan law. Fitzwater asserted that while no one wants to give money to the Sandinistas, providing UNO with direct campaign funds was to the only way to ensure a reasonable chance for free and fair elections. (Basic data from Notimex, 10/17/89; New York Times, 10/18/89)

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