10-20-1989

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More Fallout In U.S. From Oct. 3 Attempted Coup In Panama

by Deborah Tyrolo

Category/Department: General

Published: Friday, October 20, 1989

Oct. 11: An unidentified congressional official cited by the New York Times, who has interviewed some of the surviving participants in the attempted coup in Miami, said the rebels asserted they were promised much more direct US military support than has been acknowledged by the Bush administration. Capt. Javier Licona reportedly has said he had been told by the coup leader, Maj. Moises Giroldi, that the US had promised to use helicopter gunships to fly over Panamanian airfields and prevent the arrival of reinforcements to Panama City by air. Licona also said that the US had promised to block strategic roads into Panama City much earlier than they did. The congressional official said Licona stated that Maj. Giroldi believed he could persuade Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega to retire, and that US officials told him they could provide assistance in a coup that ended in Noriega's death. Other rebels reportedly favored turning the general over to the US, or killing him. Oct. 12: An unidentified administration official told the New York Times that the White House plans to issue specific guidelines to US military, intelligence and diplomatic officials in Panama with the objective of providing more rapid and clearer communication with potential coup plotters. Among other things, administration officials have said they feel restrained by the Senate Intelligence Committee from even talking to coup plotters who might assassinate Noriega. Oct. 16: CIA director William Webster called on President George Bush and the Congress to consider giving the Agency greater latitude in supporting potentially violent efforts to overthrow foreign dictators. In an interview with the Times, Webster said an executive order prohibiting US involvement in assassinations had been interpreted to prohibit US assistance to any coup that could lead to the death of a country's leader, even in the heat of battle. The executive order on intelligence, as approved by President Gerald Ford on Feb. 18, 1976, said, "No employee of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, political assassination." In 1978, President Jimmy Carter strengthened the provisions to say that "no person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government shall engage, or conspire to engage, in assassination." President Ronald Reagan retained that language in 1981 after a dispute among his intelligence advisers. The 1976 order was adopted after congressional investigations detailed the CIA's role in assassination plots against President Fidel Castro of Cuba and others. Webster said: "The United States does not engage in selective, individual assassination. But the United States has other important overriding concerns about security and protecting democracy in areas of the world where it has a legitimate claim of interest. And when despots take over, there has to be a means to deal with that short of making us to be hired killers." Webster said he wanted to see rules for the CIA so clearly defined that Agency personnel "can go right up to the edge of that authority and not worry if they or their agency is going to get into trouble." A former Federal judge, Webster described how he believed the executive order was interpreted at present. He said a US-devised plan for the assassination of Noriega was unequivocally prohibited. Webster continued: "Now the next thing is, hire a guy to kill Noriega or fund a group who wants to kill Noriega. Our executive order would have in the past been construed at least that we could not do that, because we would just be using someone else to do what we couldn't do ourselves. "Now it begins to get a little tighter when you say, `Here is a group
that says it doesn't plan to kill him, but they're going to have to play rough and it could happen.' "Now we're in the area that has to be addressed." Oct. 17: White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater said, "We certainly are in agreement with everything Judge Webster said yesterday." Earlier this month, President Bush's National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, who served in the same capacity in the Ford administration, said in an interview with the New York Times that the rules on assassination had been forced on the executive branch by a Congress bent on "micro-management." Rep. Anthony C. Beilinson (D-Calif.), chairperson of the House Intelligence Committee, said administration officials were overstating the restrictions imposed by the executive order to counter criticism of the White House's handling of events in Panama. He said, "I think it's an unfair burden to put on the executive order. It's also unfair to use Panama as a lever to change something that has made good sense and should be on the books in the first place." Beilinson said he was personally uncomfortable with the idea of US covert aid to coup plotters whose plans called for violence but did not include the death of their country's leader. "I myself do not believe that we should be involved, except in extreme circumstances, in overthrowing governments or deposing leaders, however bad they may be," he said. Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (R-Ind.), who chaired the House Intelligence Committee from 1984 to 1986, said: "No person from the intelligence community ever came to me in those years and said, 'Look, this executive order has us hamstrung.'" Unidentified administration officials cited by the Times said they would like to refine the interpretation of the executive order to allow for links to coup plotters who plan violence, but not the killing of their nation's leader or leaders. (Basic data from New York Times, 10/11/89, 10/13/89, 10/17/89, 10/18/89)