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LADB Staff

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President Bush Appointments Otto Reich to DoS

by LADB Staff

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The White House announced Jan. 11 that President George W. Bush had named Cuban-born Otto Reich as assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs. Since Congress was not in session, the recess appointment does not need Senate confirmation, and Reich may serve until the next recess at the end of the year without having to face confirmation hearings. Bush sent the nomination to the Senate in March 2001, but Senate Democrats refused to hold hearings on the appointment.

There was little likelihood that the democratically controlled Senate would have confirmed Reich. Top Democratic senators, including Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-SD), firmly opposed the appointment. Some senators said flatly that the appointment was dead. Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT), chair of the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on Latin America, said during the session just ended that he would not give Reich a hearing.

White House spokeswoman Anne Womack said Democrats left the president no other choice, and the recess appointment was necessary because of the "critical" nature of the appointment. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) told the Associated Press in March that "Otto is a good fit with the president and is a good team player as well as a person who has forward-thinking, innovative ideas on how to revamp US-Latin American policy."

Former President Ronald Reagan (1980-1988) put Reich in charge of the State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy. There, Reich ran a covert operation to build support for Reagan's war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Among other things, he put out false and misleading accounts of events in Nicaragua. On several occasions Reich's office planted op-ed pieces damaging to the Sandinistas in major newspapers without revealing that they were written by paid consultants.

During the investigation of the Iran-Contra scandal, a report by the Government Accounting Office (GAO) said the Office of Public Diplomacy was producing and disseminating "covert propaganda activities designed to influence the media and the public to support the administration's Latin American policies" (see NotiSur, 1993-10-22).

Declassified documents obtained by the Washington-based National Security Archive include a report by the congressional committees examining the Iran-Contra scandal in 1987. The report said, "'Public diplomacy' turned out to mean public-relations lobbying, all at taxpayers' expense."

Another report, by the House Foreign Affairs Committee staff in 1988, said, "Senior CIA officials with backgrounds in covert operations, as well as military intelligence and psychological operations specialists from the Department of Defense, were deeply involved in establishing and participating in a domestic political and propaganda operations run through an obscure bureau in the Department of State which reported directly to the National Security Council rather than through

the normal State Department channels....These private individuals and organizations raised and spent funds for the purpose of influencing congressional votes and US domestic news media. This network raised and funneled money to offshore bank accounts...for disbursement at the direction of [National Security Council official] Lt. Col [Oliver] North. Almost all of these activities were hidden from public view and many of the key individuals involved were never questioned or interviewed by the Iran/Contra committees."

In 1986, Reagan named Reich ambassador to Venezuela where he came to the aid of convicted Cuban-exile terrorist Orlando Bosch. Bosch was sentenced to four years imprisonment in the 1960s for firing a bazooka on a freighter in Miami, which he said was carrying cargo to Cuba (see NotiSur, 1992-05-13). In 1978, Venezuelan authorities charged Bosch and Luis Posada Carriles with blowing up a Cubana de Aviacion airliner in 1976 killing 73 people. Reich unsuccessfully tried to obtain a US visa for Bosch after he was released from a Venezuelan prison. Bosch then entered the US illegally. With prompting from the Cuban-exile community, President George H.W. Bush gave Bosch a pardon. Bosch has been living in Florida ever since.

Opponents of the appointment also noted that Reich was a lobbyist for Bacardi-Martini, whose legal battle with a Cuban-French firm for rights to the rum label Havana Club is strongly supported by the right-wing exile groups in Miami (see NotiCen, 2001-08-16). Reich also had a hand in writing the Helms-Burton bill, which indirectly benefits Bacardi by permitting lawsuits against foreign competitors who do business in Cuba. Secretary of State Colin Powell defended Reich as a knowledgeable diplomat. "He has done nothing nothing at all in his career in government that should be seen as disqualifying for this job," Powell said.

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