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NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506

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National Security Planning Group Meeting  
February 20, 1987, 11:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m., Situation Room

SUBJECT: Central America (U)

PARTICIPANTS:

The President

The Vice President

The Vice President's Office:

Craig Fuller

State:

John Whitehead  
Elliott Abrams  
Ambassador Philip Habib

White House:

Donald T. Regan  
Frank C. Carlucci  
Colin L. Powell  
William Ball  
Marlin Fitzwater

Defense:

Caspar W. Weinberger  
Richard Armitage

Justice:

Edwin Meese, III

OMB:

James C. Miller  
Wayne Army

CIA:

Robert Gates  
Alan Fiers

JCS:

Admiral William J. Crowe  
General Robert T. Hennis

USIA:

Charles Z. Wick

NSC:

Jose S. Sorzano

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By WIT, NARA, Date 12/21/05

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Minutes

The President opened the meeting by expressing his determination to prevail in Central America and indicated that time was running short. He expressed his unflinching support for the Freedom Fighters as well as for the Central American democracies. He urged all members of the Administration to work harder to make the policy succeed and he defined success as democracy in Nicaragua. This goal was the same as the one contained in the promises made by the Sandinistas in 1979 to the OAS. The Sandinistas, however, betrayed those promises. We have to tell our story and counter a sophisticated disinformation campaign mounted by the Sandinistas which has confused the public. We have to get to the American people our story, especially the human side of the horrors committed by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. He then recalled a press conference he held two years ago where a Nicaraguan minister had shown the scars left on him by Sandinista tortures. If the American people know about this type of information, the President expressed confidence that they would support our policy. (S)

Mr. Carlucci: Our Nicaraguan policy is facing increasing opposition on the Hill. This is ironic because the military situation of the contras looks better than it has for a long time. They are hitting targets deep inside Nicaragua. These successes go unreported. (S)

We need to address a number of questions. Have we been clear in saying that "democracy" is our goal in Nicaragua? In the past we have buried this objective among others and there may have been legitimate reasons for that tactic. But should we be more specific now and present clearer choices to the American people? That might involve clarifying what do we mean by a "win" and redefining our objectives. Everyone expects quick success from the contras but the contras are not intending to take territory or march on Managua. They will wage a classical guerrilla war and that means that the war must have a political strategy just as well as a military one. (S)

What are our diplomatic goals? Are we confident that Contadora will produce those goals or should we be concentrating instead on isolating the Sandinistas and giving international legitimacy to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance? (S)

How do we present a clear choice to the American people? Do we put it in an East-West context or do we present it as a clear choice between democracy and communism? Will a diplomatic rupture with the Sandinistas help in presenting those clear choices or would it give us problems on the Hill? (S)

How do we fully mobilize U.S. Government resources on behalf of our policy? For instance, having FSO's on home leave give speeches in their respective communities? (S)

How do we develop a Congressional strategy that will provide sustained assistance to the contras? (S)

Finally, the contras will have 16,000 men inside Nicaragua in the next few weeks. How do we respond to possible Cuban-Soviet escalation as the fighting intensifies? These are not easy questions but we need to wrestle with them and focus today's discussion on them. (S)

Mr. Gates analyzed the situation in Nicaragua under three major themes. The situation of the resistance; the state of the Sandinistas and the Soviet-Cuban presence. (S)

The past three months indicates that the progress of the resistance is going on smoothly and on schedule. The resupply efforts that are currently lagging will be on schedule shortly. Since last November, 13,000 contras have reinfilitrated into Nicaragua including the southern front. They have stepped up the attacks and the level of fighting will intensify in the next few weeks. Resupplying capabilities are currently stretched to the limit. The Sandinistas, for their part, have improved their military capabilities through better coordination. They now have 13 Cuban-trained counterinsurgency battalions, are using helicopters with increased effectiveness and bombing missions are being planned. However, they have problems. The fighting units are tired due to the strenuous counterinsurgency effort. The veteran soldiers are being released and replaced with draftees. Manpower is stretched thin. The Soviet-Cuban support for the Sandinistas was at \$1 billion in 1986. They have provided roughly 30 helicopters. There are 2,000 to 2,500 Cuban advisers down to company level and several hundred arrived since November. They also fly and maintain the helicopters. (S)

Overall, we should anticipate increased fighting and heavy casualties on both sides in the coming weeks with neither side gaining a decisive advantage. We should watch whether the contras will be able to sustain a large force inside Nicaragua after the rains start or whether they will have to redeploy back to Honduras for rest and recuperation. Obviously much will depend on whether U.S. support is sustainable over the long-run because the program also must have a political side to it. We also need to watch whether the contras can develop political support among the local population. (S)

Mr. Meese asked Mr. Gates who else helps the Sandinistas besides the Soviets and the Cubans? (S)

Mr. Gates: The Soviets and the entire Eastern European community are represented, the Palestinians also are present, but only the Cubans are fighting in the field. (S)

Mr. Regan asked how much money has the U.S. given so far to the contras and assuming that they can receive another \$100 million, what will it do for them? (C)

Alan Fiers responded that with the extra \$100 million, they would have received \$250 million total. (U)

Mr. Gates: At this level of expenditure, money is less important than the political message of support conveyed by the appropriations. Indeed, less money but a clearer assurance of U.S. support might be better. Even with more money, nobody expects a quick march on Managua. The intention is to prevent the consolidation of the Sandinista regime and to keep our options open. (S)

The President: I have a daydream. I keep reading and hearing about Sandinista helicopters. Our side can blow up bridges and power grids, but can they destroy those helicopters on the ground? (S)

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The President: Great! (S)

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As Amended  
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Secretary Weinberger: The Afghani Mujahidin have been very successful doing that, Mr. President, and it is clear that a sustained drive on our part is very necessary. But we also have to consider the consequences of faltering in our drive or of failing. The results are going to be very negative for the United States. We will not have just another Cuba but a Soviet base in the Central American region. There can be no doubt about this. It is an absolute certainty. We have helped them technically but we have to assist in a sustained fashion. Otherwise, the consequences are terrible. So I believe that we ought to recognize the contras as a government. (S)

Director Miller (to Gates): What data are you using to make your economic analysis? (U)

Mr. Gates: Such traditional indicators as lack of consumer goods, spiralling inflation and unemployment. (S)

Alan Fiers: The Sandinistas themselves consider their bad economic situation as their Achilles heel. In addition, the reinfiltrating contras have been pleasantly surprised about the sympathetic reception they have received from the Nicaraguans. (S)

Admiral Crowe: None of that information gets to the public in this country. (S)

Deputy Secretary Whitehead noted that the agenda allocated only ten minutes for all the problems, political, diplomatic and Congressional, relating to our Nicaraguan policy. Consequently, rather than deal with them in an inadequate span of time, we would rather look back to the inception of the program and note that the progress so far attained shows that is working, despite the current frustrations. Three years ago our objectives were: (1) support for democracy in Central America; (2) support for economic development in the region to raise the standard of living; (3) resolution of disputes and their settlement through national dialogues; (4) security assistance to prevent communist subversion in the region. In addition, the Nicaraguan goals were: (1) implementation of the democratic promises made to the OAS in 1979; (2) termination of Sandinista subversion of neighboring countries; (3) removal of Cuban-Soviet influence in Nicaragua; (4) the reestablishment of a rough level of military parity in the region. (S)

We have made considerable progress in the area but quite clearly we have not gained much ground on the goals specific to Nicaragua. There are some serious problems ahead of us. The resistance forces are growing in numbers and in military strength but they are torn apart by political disunity. The non-resignation of Arturo Cruz helped the situation but we are still in a fluid state. It would take several months for the UNO reforms to take root and things to settle down on the diplomatic front. There are doubts whether we can move forward. Mexico continues to be heavily tilted on behalf of the Sandinistas but the diplomatic track is essential for continued support on the Hill. The Arias initiative is helpful yet flawed since it excludes the contras from negotiations with the Sandinistas and calls for a cut in U.S. assistance to the contras. To maintain Congressional support necessary to sustain our efforts in Nicaragua, the diplomatic track, the \$300 million in economic assistance to the democracies of the region, and UNO reform are all essential. (S)

Mr. Carlucci: If our diplomatic goal is to isolate the Sandinistas, is it practical to deal with Contadora which includes Mexico? In Contadora, the Sandinistas will not be isolated. Can we ever get Mexico to side with us? Can we bring Arias' Central American initiative to the forefront? (S)

Ambassador Habib: Contadora has enormous credibility. In fact, by concentrating on our Central American friends, we insure that Contadora will not get off the track. We will not get isolated and the Central Americans can block Contadora. This is accepted now by all the participants. The Arias initiative breaks away from this process while staying in the Contadora context. He concentrates on the political aspects of Contadora which have

been neglected by emphasizing the need for democracy in Nicaragua. Nevertheless, the Arias plan has deficiencies. This is recognized by both Honduras and El Salvador. We need to improve the Arias plan because we need to find a political settlement. I will be going to Costa Rica to meet with Arias this weekend and see what we can get from him. The Mexicans also have to know about our views. (Mr. Carlucci: We should bring more pressure on them.) We should not sabotage the Contadora process. If it succeeds, it is good. It is a Latinization of the regional problem and we should not drop it. (S)

Mr. Carlucci: Okay. We will resist the temptation. (S)

Elliott Abrams: Contadora's real benefit is in the Congress. We could declare it our objective to set it aside. But it is much better tactics to point out to the Hill that it is the Sandinistas that will not negotiate. The problem is that so far the Contadora process has not given such a clear-cut outcome. Then comes the Arias plan which could provide such a clear-cut outcome but at this moment it is deeply flawed. The Congress, of course, needs the reassurance of a diplomatic track because they are scared of our alleged militaristic intentions. (S)

The President: Those are the same Congressmen who opposed military assistance to El Salvador when the democratic government was being besieged by the guerrillas. Now they side with the Sandinistas against the Freedom Fighters. You have to see the TV news to see the disinformation campaign that the Nicaraguans have in this country. Last night I saw a TV program where, despite all the democratic progress, President Duarte still comes across as the bad guy while the Marxist guerrillas are portrayed positively. (S)

John Whitehead: We have to talk more frequently to Congressional leaders about our Central American policies. Congressional visits to Central America are generally a good thing and have in the past worked to our advantage. The problem right now is that some Congressmen like Senator Dodd are insisting on excluding the U.S. Ambassadors from their meetings with Central American presidents. This is doing serious damage to our foreign policy and confusing our friends in the region. We must speak to the leadership on the Hill about this problem. (S)

Mr. Carlucci: Yes, we are working on a proposal to do just that. (S)

Charles Wick: We in the Administration agree on our principles and in our objectives in Central America. The only problem is Congress. Yet the Congress obeys the people. A solution, therefore, would be to inform the American people about the threat to our security presented by the Soviet buildup in Nicaragua. Perhaps what we need is a high-level White House conference with great visibility to get publicity for our point of view.

Maybe we should go to the major public relations firms in this country for assistance in turning around public opinion. (S)

The President: I am convinced that there are some in the Congress who do not need more information. They already know about conditions in Nicaragua but sympathize with it. (S)

Secretary Weinberger: Breaking diplomatic relations with the Sandinistas and recognizing the contras will help in presenting our position to the people. The downside is that there will be a loss in intelligence capabilities but not very much. At this moment there are more contras willing to fight that can be adequately armed. Recognizing them will clarify many of the legal issues and send a signal of seriousness. By breaking diplomatic relations with the Sandinistas we will also get rid of the numerous Sandinista delegations in Washington which are an essential part of their disinformation machine. For starters, we should recognize the contras and get rid of the Nicaraguan Embassy and start an information campaign to counter the Sandinista disinformation campaign. We are doing quite well inside Nicaragua at this moment. (S)

Attorney General Meese: The ghost of Vietnam must be exorcised. We must show to the American people the geographical location of Nicaragua and how close it is to the United States. We must show to them the Soviet threat to our security which will surely emanate from a communist Nicaragua. We must bring to the United States victims of Sandinista atrocities for Americans to see the sufferings that the Sandinistas are inflicting on their people. We have just 20 months to do all this. The next Administration cannot be relied on to carry on, therefore, our strategy must be to be in the best position in January 1989. How can we do this? The question needs to be answered. Can we really succeed in negotiations with the Sandinistas? If the answer is negative, then we should recognize the contras as a government in exile and go to the Hill and share with them our strategy. (S)

The President: We must communicate the horror stories of persecution and the people will respond positively. Our problem is that the press ignores those horror stories. (S)

Elliott Abrams: We must be aware that breaking relations will close the Nicaraguan Embassy in Washington but their OAS Mission would remain. We also might lose some Hill support and may create a David and Goliath scenario. This last point, however, may be counteracted by placing the Sandinistas in the context of the larger Soviet threat. (S)

Secretary Weinberger: Yes, Americans are worried about another Vietnam but there is no need for U.S. troops in Central America. Given enough money, the contras will do well. El Salvador has seen great progress and we did that with only 55 U.S. advisers. (S)

The President: There is a difference between Vietnam and Central America. In Vietnam, we did not intend to win. We intend to win this one. (S)

Mr. Carlucci: To summarize, the PRG on Nicaragua, under the chairmanship of Colin Powell, will review U.S. goals and report back to the NSPG.

Secondly, the PRG will also develop a political strategy to attain those objectives and report back to the NSPG. The Administration should do more in the area of public relations. We need to put together a task force on public diplomacy to mobilize our resources. Will Ball will put together a comprehensive Congressional plan, including visits, meetings, etc. to obtain sustained support for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance. (S)