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FILE ONE

ONE POLICY REAGAN COULDN'T SELL  
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WASHINGTON

President Reagan waged an intense, 10-week campaign for a resumption of military aid to the Nicaraguan rebels but the showdown votes by the House and the Senate indicate he won few converts to his cause.

Congress said no to Reagan's military aid proposal Tuesday night even though he put his own prestige on the line in a concerted lobbying effort that depicted resistance forces in heroic terms and the Sandinista government as a foe to be feared.

The Senate approved a restoration of aid to the rebels only after Reagan promised that none of the funds in the \$14 million assistance proposal would be spent on arms and ammunition. Instead, it will be used only for basic needs such as food, clothing and medicine. A short time later, the House rejected the same proposal.

The Senate-passed measure is sure to be diluted even further once a compromise settlement is worked out with the House, where there is strong sentiment against all forms of direct aid to the resistance forces.

Reagan began the campaign for aid on Feb. 16 when he called the Contras "our brothers." He continued the fight for his policy right up to the eve of the vote.

There are many reasons why Reagan fell far short of his goal: TOO MANY DOUBTERS=

Reagan was unable to convince enough members of Congress there was a direct link between American national security and the situation in Nicaragua. His warnings that communists would be on the march right up to the American border unless they were contained in Nicaragua generally have fallen on deaf ears. TEPID LATIN AMERICAN SUPPORT=

Reagan found himself in the position of being more concerned about Latin American security than the Latins themselves. No hemispheric president backed Reagan on the issue of U.S. aid to the Contras. Costa Rican President Luis Alberto Monge voiced support for that policy last week but later backed away. PARTISANSHIP=

Some Democrats appeared to see the Nicaragua aid proposal an irresistible issue on which to "get even" with Reagan after suffering one demoralizing setback after another at the president's hands on other issues. VIETNAM LEGACY=

Twenty years ago this week, the United States dispatched 20,000 Marines to the Dominican Republic because of suspicion of communist involvement in a political uprising. And now, 10 years after the Vietnam debacle ended at a cost of 50,000 U.S. servicemen, Americans remain extremely wary about undertaking foreign commitments. INCENTIVES OR DISINCENTIVES?=-

The administration felt the Sandinistas would be flexible only if pressured militarily by the Contras. Many in Congress believed that strategy led to a hardening of Sandinista policy. MINING THE HARBORS=

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The administration policy in Nicaragua never recovered from the CIA-sponsored mining of Nicaraguan harbors a year ago. Since the U.S. role in the mining became public knowledge, Congress has approved no funds for the Contras. NATURE OF THE SANDINISTAS=

Some in Congress, including Sens. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, and John Kerry, D-Mass., viewed President Daniel Ortega as a misunderstood democrat rather than a Marxist autocrat. MEANS VS. ENDS=

Reagan faced widespread doubts that \$14 million in aid to the rebels would solve his Nicaraguan problem. His critics believed the small amount of money being sought was a prelude to requests for larger sums and to steadily escalating warfare. IMPATIENCE=

The administration felt that to the extent the Sandinistas talked about free elections, non-intervention and protection of fundamental liberties, it was the result of Contra military pressure. The Congress felt this degree of progress was too modest to justify continuing aid to the rebels. THE MORAL ISSUE=

The administration believes it is not immoral to intervene in a foreign nation if the objective is to prevent intervention elsewhere by that country. Many in Congress think otherwise. LACK OF EVIDENCE=

There was continuing skepticism about administration claims that Nicaragua was systematically supporting the Salvadoran insurgency. Where's the proof, the skeptics asked. The administration, citing the need for confidentiality, kept the evidence to itself. CONFUSION=

Was the administration supporting the Contras to help them overthrow the Sandinistas, to pressure the Sandinistas, to interdict arms bound from Nicaragua to El Salvador? Was Reagan supporting the Contadora peace process fully or was he just giving lip service to it? Rightly or wrongly, many found the administration's responses to these questions inconsistent or unconvincing. RHETORIC=

For all its shortcomings, Nicaragua is not a "totalitarian dungeon," as Reagan described it. Moreover, the United States has friendly relations with countries far more repressive than Nicaragua. CONTRA IMAGE PROBLEMS=

The Contras were subjected to far more media scrutiny than the Sandinistas were at the time of the 1979 revolution. Few examined the Marxist connections of the Sandinistas then but many examined the links at time exaggerated by critics of the Contras to the deposed rightist dictatorship.

Reagan has said he will never abandon the Contras but his options appear to be limited. Congress made that clear Tuesday night.