'he Second Line of Defense

: the center of the sometimes rancid and
ı overwrought debate about American
ign policy in Central America stands Rep.
e McCurdy. He's a young (36) third-term
ıocrat from Oklahoma who some say is a
)resumptuous to be making like a secre-
of state. But any port in a storm, I say,
a high-priority presidential policy that is
ıdering.

ast time around, in April, administration
)orters in the House gleefully gambled on
t looked like a clever parliamentary ma-
ver. The effect was to stall an effort by
Curdy and a bloc of centrist Democratic
l a few Republican) swing voters to stretch
and pare down the administration's pro-
n for $70 million in military aid and $30
ion in "humanitarian" aid for Nicaraguan
:ras (a k a "freedom fighters"). The Great
ımunicator would then lead a lobbying
paign to turn congressional opinion
ınd in the administration's favor.

ut two months later we see a familiar
naly. The president's two-to-one approval
ıg in the polls is matched by about the
e balance of public opinion against contra

Most Americans are still not buying
ıald Reagan's forebodings of the awful
sequences if the House does not match the
ate's approval of the president's program.
'his week the House is scheduled to take a
)nd whack at contra aid. Dave McCurdy is
e again the point man in search of a
ıpromise to resolve a struggle that the
ıinistration appparently has no better
nce of winning than it did two months ago.

this time, there are significant differ-
es. The administration insists that the
d is urgent; Republicans can no longer
l.

Meanwhile, McCurdy, on behalf of the "swing voters," has been working with top House leaders on a two-pronged approach. His draft amendment would impose the same negative constraints and conditions on military aid as before. But it would add something new—and positive.

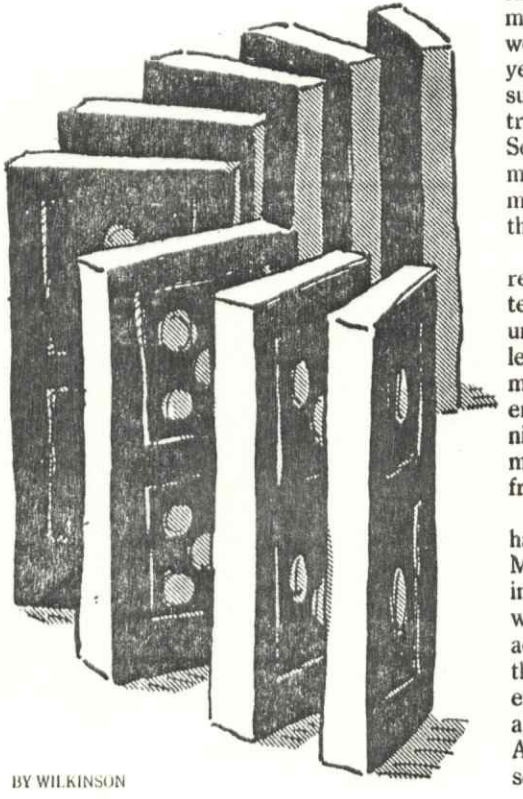
McCurdy was one of a delegation of a dozen compromise seekers (nine Democrats and three Republicans) who recently returned from the region impressed by the fragile flowering of democracy in El Salvador and Guatemala, the somewhat deeper rooted democratic tendencies in Honduras, and the well-established freedoms in Costa Rica. So McCurdy and Co. would fall back and regroup. They would concentrate the biggest U.S. effort not on contra support but on shoring up these potential targets of Nicaragua's expansionist ambitions.

The administration can hardly dismiss the idea out of hand. What's proposed is a Central American economic aid program borrowed from the recommendations of Ronald Reagan's Kissinger Commission. Even the numbers, something in excess of $400 million over several years, are the same.

Now that the budget squeeze threatens to decimate U.S. foreign aid to all but a few favorites (notably Israel and Egypt), the predictable administration position would be that Congress couldn't find the money—even if asked. But according to congressional sources, McCurdy has a ready reply: When the president talks about a "national security disaster" if the contras don't get their guns, he is talking as much about the province of the Defense Department as the concern of State or the foreign-aid agency.

So the idea would be, as one source put it, to "program the money out of the Pentagon." The theory is that the money would have to come from there in the end, if Ronald Reagan's most inflamed fears are realized and U.S. force is deemed necessary to stem the communist tide.

"By building up The Four," as one congressional aide put it, "we could show the peasants that democracy works." This presumably would strengthen resistance to communist subversion in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica. There is also the "showcase" factor, which is as likely to create pressure for change in Nicaragua over time as anything that the contra forces could accomplish.



BY WILKINSON

Regularly, the specter is raised of a powerful 60,000-man Nicaraguan army with 60,000 militiamen in reserve and high-tech Soviet weapons. Suddenly, reports are produced of yet one more shipment of Soviet military supplies to the Sandinistas. What the administration does not explain is what would stop the Soviets from yet another, and another, shipment of arms in response to the relatively modest military aid to the contras for which the president is pleading.

The issue is both enormously complex and relatively simple: If you believe that a counterrevolutionary insurgency that has been unable to seize and hold any territory for any length of time over a span of five years or more can be infused (for $100 million) with enough zeal and discipline to make the Sandinistas say "uncle," the United States might be morally obligated to help free the Nicaraguans from Sandinista repression.

But suppose you share the belief of most hard-headed experts—that the government in Managua has consolidated its hold and will be impossible to dislodge by indigenous forces without much more military aid than the administration is asking for. In that case, there is something to be said for a greater effort to reinforce the second line of defense against communist expansion in Central America: those countries where democracy seems to be proving itself.

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