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FOREIGN AFFAIRS Flora Lewis

Two U.S. Wars

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras
Two wars that Americans think of quite separately have begun to converge in middle America. It is a matter of priorities that overlap and distort policy decisions.

One is Washington's proclaimed "war on drugs." The other is its proxy war against the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua and Communist-backed rebels elsewhere in the region.

The conflict has already emerged in a harsh, ugly confrontation with Panama's strongman, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, which is likely to get worse before there is any resolution. Now it is surfacing here in Honduras, which has provided the essential bases and supply routes to keep the contra insurgency going against Nicaragua.

Honduran officials reacted with pained dismay against charges of their military's involvement in the drug traffic to the U.S., which were published in The New York Times last Friday. They say their Government asked for a permanent representative of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency in Tegucigalpa back in 1984, rejected then because Washington didn't consider it an important route in the trade. The Hondurans also delivered a couple of people for trial in the U.S., though without full extradition procedures.

But a lot has happened since then. American officials, seeking to defend both the Hondurans and themselves, say it is only recently that this country has become a significant way point on the Colombian drug barons' trail because of D.E.A. successes in intercepting shipments on more direct routes.

Relations between U.S. military, C.I.A. and State Department representatives and senior Honduran offi-

cers are so close, however, that there can be little question of Washington's knowledge of the current situation.

One widespread report here, relayed by various non-American sources, is that last October the U.S. told Gen. Humberto Regalado Hernández, chief of the armed forces, that it had definitely identified five key Honduran colonels as involved in the drug traffic.

Colonels are the senior officers; there is only one general, the boss.

The D.E.A. was persuaded not to act on its information, according to this report, so as not to endanger Honduran cooperation in the contra war. Instead, a compromise was struck by which the colonels were to be removed from posts where they could be active. This was a double-edged deal, since it left the threat of future revelations in Washington's hands.

But now, the House vote against further aid to the contras has opened new questions of who can weigh on whom. So far, the report says, the colonels remain where they were. But neither are the Hondurans making any problems in the frantic U.S. effort to deliver all the supplies it can before the legal March 1 cutoff date.

If the ban remains in force and the war winds down, the equation changes. The Honduran base would diminish in importance to the U.S., though presumably military aid would be continued for Honduras so long as it is squeezed between the Sandinistas and the Salvadoran rebels. But then the D.E.A. would have more clout in the interminable Washington battles about where America's prime interest really lies.

There was a similar conflict of interests during the Vietnam War, when the C.I.A. indulged drug traffic from the hinterland in return for local cooperation. The murky Latin American drug scene dwarfs that experience.

It is closer to home, with more complex and dangerous political implications, and produces wealth far beyond the national budgets of many countries in the region. The immensity of the money generated is reflected in the offer by Colombia's Medellín cartel to pay off the country's \$10 billion foreign debt if Bogotá cancels its extradition treaty with Washington.

This is imperialism in reverse, on the streets of the U.S. It is the vast U.S. market for cocaine that makes it possible. But it has been abetted by U.S. policies attempting to manipulate weak and poor Latin countries in service of the Reagan Administration's version of the anti-Communist crusade.

The question isn't a matter of choosing between support for friendly, democratic regimes in Latin America and fighting drugs. It is finding the way to promote both needs. Covert action and proxy war require less than scrupulous collaborators. With so much money available in the drug market, linkage becomes almost inevitable in the tolerance of dirty tricks.

This is another reason to support the Central American peace plan, not only in its attempt to end civil wars but also in its political and development ambitions. The U.S. will always live next door to Central America, and needs a better, longer-term view of what will encourage a healthy neighborhood. Backing guerrilla war puts greater U.S. security interests at risk.