

Pressing for Peace *New York Times 9-8-87*
A Central American Initiative

WASHINGTON
PRESIDENT REAGAN floated another Central American peace plan last week, only to have it quickly overtaken. The opposition this time was not Congressional resistance or Sandinista intransigence. It was a regional treaty signed by the presidents of the Central American nations, at a meeting in Guatemala from which Washington's representatives were barred.

House Speaker Jim Wright, who had helped to draft Washington's version, immediately embraced the Central American plan, behind which Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sánchez has been the moving force. It was, Mr. Wright said, "a very positive step."

That left the Administration in a box. In public, it has been calling for a regional peace treaty for five years at least. In private, it has effectively frustrated every effort to complete a treaty that did not remove the Sandinistas from power. The Guatemala pact would require the Sandinistas to open Nicaraguan society, lifting restrictions on the press and political parties. But they would remain in power, and, after a cease-fire, aid to the contra rebels would in theory no longer be necessary.

For the treaty's signatories — Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador,

Nicaragua and Costa Rica — the new plan is a carefully crafted maneuver to end regional tensions without irritating the United States or Nicaragua. On the one hand, most of the countries are heavily dependent on American economic and military assistance, and so for the most part, until now, have swallowed their objections to contra aid. On the other hand, Nicaragua is the region's military power. Some of the other countries are afraid of retribution should American interest in the region fade.

As steps to implement the treaty begin over the next several months, Congress is highly unlikely to renew military aid to the contras. Money voted this year will run out by mid-November. Under the accelerated timetable of President Reagan's plan, he would have been free to ask for more aid after Sept. 30 if all Washington's conditions had not been met.

Much of the Guatemala treaty's language is open to varying interpretations. But however it is read, it is clearly not one the White House would have picked. With the Central Americans and the Congressional Democrats endorsing it, however, the Administration is finding it difficult to reject what others are calling a genuine attempt to bring peace.

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