

THE ANTI-CONTRA-WAR CAMPAIGN: ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS OF A DECENTRALIZED MOVEMENT

Roger Peace

Abstract

This essay examines the nature and organizational dynamics of the anti-Contra-war campaign in the United States. Lasting from 1982 to 1990, this anti-interventionist movement sought to halt the U.S.-backed guerrilla war against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. The forces pulling the anti-Contra-war campaign (ACWC) together and pulling it apart are analyzed. The essay is comprised of four parts: 1) overview of the Contra war and the ACWC; 2) the major activist networks involved in the ACWC, 3) the development of common political goals and educational themes; and 4) the national coordination of activities—lobbying, educational outreach, protests, and transnational activities. The final section addresses the significance of the ACWC from an historical perspective.

Introduction

The U.S.-directed Contra war against Sandinista Nicaragua in the 1980s sparked an anti-interventionist campaign that involved over one thousand U.S. peace and justice organizations (Central America Resource Center, 1987). The anti-Contra-war campaign (ACWC) was part of a vigorous Central America movement that included efforts to halt U.S. aid to the Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments and provide sanctuary for Central American refugees. Scholarly literature on the anti-Contra-war campaign is not extensive. Some scholars have examined the ACWC in the context of the Central America movement (Battista, 2002; Brett, 1991; Gosse, 1988, 1995, 1998; Nepstad, 1997, 2001, 2004; Smith, 1996). Some have concentrated on particular aspects of the ACWC—political influence (Arnson and Brenner, 1993), local organizing in Boston and New Bedford, Massachusetts (Hannon, 1991; Ryan, 1989, 1991), and transnational activities (Kavaloski, 1990; Nepstad, 1996; Nepstad and Smith, 1999; Scallen, 1992).

This essay focuses on the overall design and organizational dynamics of the anti-Contra-war campaign, a subject that has received only sketchy treatment in the above studies. Unlike the centrally coordinated Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign (Solo, 1988; Kleidman, 1993; Wittner, 2003), the ACWC relied on an informal division of labor among national organizations and a cooperative spirit in carrying out its activities. This

essay examines 1) the major activist networks involved in the ACWC; 2) the development of common political goals and educational themes; and 3) the national coordination of activities, including lobbying, educational outreach, protests, and humanitarian-aid and sister-city projects. For students of social movements, the largely decentralized ACWC offers a study in contrasts to centrally coordinated campaigns and movements headed by charismatic leaders. For peace activists, the successes and deficiencies of the campaign's coordination arguably hold lessons for ongoing efforts to build a more united, broad-based, and influential peace movement. This essay begins with a brief review of the Contra war and the role of the anti-Contra-war campaign.

The Contra War and the Anti-Contra-War Campaign

The Contra war was an undeclared, "low-intensity" guerrilla war directed by the United States against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua, which came to power through a popularly supported revolution in July 1979. Soon after the revolution, scattered groups of former National Guardsmen of the deposed Somoza government began to form guerrilla units under the guidance of Argentine advisers. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began working with these *contra-revolucionarios*, or Contras, in early 1981 and assumed full control the following year. Operating out of bases in Honduras, Costa Rica, and within Nicaragua, the Contras destroyed economic assets, attacked rural villages, kidnapped young men, and killed thousands of civilians deemed pro-Sandinista. The CIA, in addition to training, arming, and directing the Contras, conducted military actions on its own, including aerial raids against military bases and oil storage tanks, and the mining of Nicaraguan harbors in early 1984. The Reagan administration also blocked international loans to Nicaragua, imposed an economic embargo against Nicaragua in May 1985, subsidized internal opposition groups besides the Contras, sidestepped peace initiatives promoted by Latin American leaders, ignored a World Court decision in 1986 that ruled U.S. actions against Nicaragua illegal, and created a special agency, the Office of Public Diplomacy, to win U.S. public and Congressional support for its policies (LeoGrande, 1998). This agency was shut down by Congress in 1987 after the General Accounting Office found it had engaged "in prohibited, covert propaganda activities designed to influence the media and the public to support the Administration's Latin American policies" (Comptroller General Harry Van Cleve, 1987).

The Reagan administration initially claimed that the Contras were needed to stop Sandinista arms transfers to anti-government rebels in El Salvador, but lack of evidence prompted the administration to shift its emphasis to the allegedly diabolical nature of the Sandinista government (Hoffman and Lardner, 1982; Mohr, 1983). In a televised address on March 16, 1986, for example, President Ronald Reagan told the nation, "There seems to be no crime to which the Sandinistas will not stoop—this is an outlaw regime. . . .

Could there be any greater tragedy than for us to sit back and permit this cancer to spread, leaving my successor to face far more agonizing decisions in the years ahead?" (Reagan, 1986). The Reagan-Bush team finally achieved its goal of ousting the Sandinistas on February 25, 1990, when a majority of Nicaraguan voters chose the United Nicaraguan Opposition, headed by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, over the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), headed by Daniel Ortega Saavadra, by a margin of 55 to 41 percent. It was not a complete victory, however, as the FSLN remained the largest single political party in the country. The cost of the eight-year Contra war was substantial: approximately 30,000 Nicaraguans killed, with thousands more maimed and wounded, 350,000 internally displaced, and nine billion dollars in economic damage (Horton, 1998, xv; Walker, 1991, 52).

The anti-Contra-war campaign took shape with the first Contra attacks in March 1982 and endured to the end of the war eight years later. Protest groups undertook a variety of activities aimed at engendering public and Congressional opposition to the war. The transnational quality of the ACWC was greater than anything previously attempted by a U.S. antiwar or anti-interventionist movement. U.S. activists delivered humanitarian aid, sent "peace witnesses" to live in and report on rural communities under attack by the Contras, organized work brigades to assist coffee and cotton harvests, facilitated the travel of tens of thousands of U.S. citizens to Nicaragua, and established more than 80 U.S.-Nicaragua sister-city partnerships (Chilsen and Rampton, 1988, 6-7). Many Americans who visited Nicaragua returned to educate their fellow citizens, helping to create a vibrant grassroots-based campaign.

The ACWC does not fit the classic model of an interest group that builds public and Congressional support until finally achieving legislative change, which more closely describes what happened with the anti-Vietnam-war movement. The ACWC achieved its main political objective of a Congressional ban on Contra aid in October 1984, due in large part to the administration's overstepping legal boundaries by mining Nicaragua's harbors. Following Reagan's landslide re-election that November, Congress backtracked and granted "non-lethal" aid to the Contras in June 1985, followed by full military aid in mid-1986. From 1987 on, Congress restricted aid to non-military supplies, which limited but did not stop Contra attacks. The Iran-Contra scandal (in which Reagan administration officials illegally sold arms to Iran and used the profits to illegally supply arms to the Contras) and the signing of the Arias peace plan by the five Central American presidents in August 1987 tipped the balance in Congress away from military aid (Arnson, 1993; LeoGrande, 1998). The ACWC lent support to Congressional opponents of the war. As noted by Cynthia J. Arnson and Philip Brenner:

Anti-contra Democrats relied on the considerable activity of groups around the country—especially in religious organizations—to convince potentially wavering members that opposition to aid would not have electoral repercussions despite the president's popularity. Even the pro-contra lobbies acknowledge "that the

strength of the anti-contra coalition was the grassroots” (Arnson and Brenner, 1993, 209).

The anti-Contra-war campaign also raised political cost of a direct U.S. attack on Nicaragua, arguably helping to deter such an attack. When Oliver North of the administration’s National Security Council drew up an invasion plan in July 1985, he listed as the first problem, not Nicaraguan defenses, but U.S. public opposition. “The American people currently consider U.S. full-scale military involvement in Nicaragua as unacceptable,” he wrote. North nonetheless hoped to manipulate the situation by enticing the Sandinista Army into chasing the Contras into Honduras, thereby justifying the entry of U.S. troops. “Public acceptance of a U.S. invasion of Nicaragua could change drastically should the Sandinista military invade either Honduras or Costa Rica,” wrote North (1985, 50). When the Reagan administration did send U.S. troops to Honduras in March 1988, as envisioned above, hundreds of protests took place across the U.S. (Schaefer, 1988). The U.S. troops were withdrawn and the crisis did not escalate.

Composition of the Anti-Contra-War Campaign

To understand the dynamics of the ACWC, it is necessary to know something about its main participants. Most activists were affiliated with Leftist, religious, and peace networks. Some were members of labor unions, feminist groups, veteran associations, and liberal civic groups such as Common Cause. These different affiliations were not mutually exclusive, as many activists identified with more than one. Each of the three main networks provided activists with a larger sense of identity, camaraderie, tradition, and visions of change beyond immediate issues; hence their drawing power.

The socialist oriented Left had a natural affinity with the Leftist Sandinista Revolution. Even before the Sandinistas triumphed, solidarity committees began to form in Europe and the U.S. The main solidarity organization in the U.S., Nicaragua Network, was established at a conference in Washington, D.C., in February 1979, with representatives of the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) on hand. The conference issued a statement declaring that “the United States government bears a direct responsibility for the long suffering of the Nicaraguan people” and that the “people of the United States have a special responsibility to show concrete solidarity with the Nicaraguan people, and to work to make the U.S. government end all forms of intervention in Nicaragua” (Nicaragua Network, 1979). Nicaragua Network grew to encompass sixty loosely affiliated local groups. An offshoot of Nicaragua Network, Nicaragua Exchange, organized work brigades to assist coffee and cotton harvests in Nicaragua.

In June 1981, Michael Harrington, president of the Democratic Socialists of America, visited Nicaragua as a member of the Socialist International. He wrote

encouragingly of the possibility of a humanistic and democratic socialism in Nicaragua and the potential for raising the standard of living and empowering citizens through democratic institutions. Sandinista Nicaragua, Harrington opined (1981, 313), could become the “good domino,” a model for other impoverished nations in the region. A decade earlier, many Leftists had placed their hopes in the democratically elected Allende government of Chile, only to see this government overthrown and replaced by a U.S.-backed military dictatorship in 1973. The election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980 prompted fears that Nicaragua would suffer a similar fate. The Republican platform (1980) tacitly endorsed the overthrow of the Sandinista government, stating, “we will support the efforts of the Nicaraguan people to establish a free and independent government.”

Religious-based activist organizations involved in the ACWC included long-established groups such as the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and Fellowship of Reconciliation, and new groups such as the Catholic based Religious Task Force on Central America (RTFCA), the Protestant based Inter-Religious Task Force on Central America (IRTFCA), and Witness for Peace (WFP). These and other activist groups worked with denominational peace and justice committees, U.S. missionaries in Central America, and Nicaraguan religious leaders to involve the liberal U.S. religious community in Central America issues. Nicaraguan leaders such as Rev. Gustavo Parajón, head of the Council of Protestant Churches, and Father Miguel d’Escoto Brockmann, Nicaraguan Minister of Foreign Relations, issued frequent, urgent appeals to U.S. Christians. “They ask us to do all we can in the United States to counter U.S. policies,” said Rev. Anthony D. Bellagamba, executive director of the U.S. Catholic Missions Association (Omang, 1984). Between 1982 and 1984, over 20 U.S. Protestant denominations, Catholic orders, and ecumenical organizations responded with statements opposing U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and the region (IRTFCA, 1984). WFP was formed in 1983 for the purpose of sending U.S. citizens to accompany Nicaraguans in communities threatened by Contra attacks—a nonviolent direct action that was more than symbolic (Griffin-Nolan, 1991). Most religious-based activist groups adopted neutral, rather than solidarity, positions toward the Sandinista government, but expressed solidarity with the Nicaraguan people. They were generally sympathetic toward Sandinista reform programs in health care, education, and land reform deemed to be in the interest of the poor majority (Brett, 2003, 110-11).

The network of peace groups expanded considerably in the 1980s, from 1,300 groups in 1983 to 5,700 in 1985, to over 7,000 in 1986 (Conetta, 1988, vii). Most peace groups joined the ACWC as the Contra war heated up in 1983 and 1984, but some were involved in the Central America movement from the start. In the latter category was the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy (CNFMP), founded in 1976, which established a Central America Working Group in 1980 to coordinate lobbying on Capitol Hill. The following year, it launched a Campaign Against U.S. Intervention to educate and mobilize the grassroots. Another national coalition, Mobilization for Survival,

founded in 1977 by 36 disarmament and anti-nuclear power organizations, broadened its mandate in 1982 to include "Peace and Justice in Central America." SANE (officially, the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy) joined the ACWC in the summer of 1983. Director David Cortright, who had opposed the Vietnam war while serving in the U.S. Army, wrote a memo to SANE staff on July 23, 1983, declaring, "The time has come for us to take a stand and make an organizational commitment to opposing the American war [in Nicaragua]. We can no longer purport to be a leading national peace organization and remain on the sidelines in this crucial struggle" (Cortright, 1983). The U.S. invasion of Grenada in October 1983 impelled more peace groups to join the ACWC, as many believed that Nicaragua would be next. Local peace groups, having developed their memberships and capacities in the disarmament movement, turned to anti-intervention organizing in increasing numbers as the Freeze Campaign wound down in 1984. In contrast to most Leftist and religious groups, which cultivated ties with Nicaragua (whether through the FSLN or nongovernmental agencies), most peace groups maintained an "anti-interventionist" orientation, being less concerned with developments within Nicaragua than with stopping the Contra war and preventing a direct U.S. invasion.

Political Goals and Educational Themes of the Anti-Contra-War Campaign

Grounds for cooperation among Leftist, religious, and peace groups lay in common opposition to the Rightward shift in U.S. foreign policies under the Reagan administration. In regard to the Contra war, an informal consensus quickly developed on the central political goal of cutting off U.S. aid to the Contras. Secondary goals involved ending U.S. military operations in the region and rescinding the U.S. embargo, which began May 1, 1985. The ease of agreement on these goals may be attributed to the commonly held view that the U.S. had no right to intervene in the internal affairs of Nicaragua, regardless of different opinions held about the Sandinistas. The principle of non-intervention, or self-determination, was established in the charters of the United Nations and the Organization of American States, and had furthermore been a staple of U.S.-Latin American relations under the Good Neighbor Policy of 1933, before being cast aside by U.S. leaders during the Cold war. The central political goal of the ACWC, had in this light shown itself to be a workable liberal policy in the past, even if it seemed more radical in the Reagan era.

The ease with which the ACWC established common political goals is significant when compared to the deep schism that developed in the anti-Vietnam-war movement over its central demands. It took activist groups more than five years to arrive at a movement-wide agreement on the goal of immediate withdrawal from Vietnam. Liberal peace groups such as SANE initially called for *gradual* U.S. disengagement from South Vietnam and multilateral negotiations, while Leftist anti-imperialist groups and some

radical pacifists called for immediate withdrawal. “The great majority of antiwar critics,” wrote historian Charles DeBenedetti (1990, 97, 123, 290), “rejected the demand for immediate withdrawal as politically infeasible.” Underlying this division were public-opinion polls at the outset of the war indicating strong support for President Lyndon Johnson’s handling of the war. By June 1970, public opinion had shifted dramatically, with nearly half the population favoring an immediate pullout of U.S. troops and only fifteen percent in favor of staying in the war. This shift in public opinion made it easy for liberals to join their radical counterparts in calling for immediate U.S. withdrawal.

The ACWC benefited from this anti-interventionist legacy of the Vietnam war, as a majority of U.S. citizens opposed U.S. aid to the Contras from the outset, according to the first opinion polls taken in April 1983. For the remainder of the decade, public opinion ran, on average, two-to-one against support for the Contras—a result for which ACWC activists took some credit. Public opposition to a U.S. military invasion of Nicaragua was even higher: on average, three-to-one in Harris polls taken between 1985 and 1987 (Sobel, 1993, 63-67). Memory of the recent Vietnam war underscored Congressional wariness of U.S. involvement in Nicaragua, prompting initial restrictions on Contra aid in December 1982 (aid could not be used for the purpose of overthrowing the Sandinista government). Over the course of the 1980s, a solid block of 185 representatives consistently voted against Contra aid (LeoGrande and Brenner, 1993, 111). Moreover, Congress “was far more responsive to anti-Contra groups than it had been to anti-Vietnam-war organizations” a decade earlier, according to Arnson and Brenner (1993, 213). The ACWC benefited from the Vietnam war legacy, to be sure, but it also had to go beyond it, as no U.S. troops were involved in the Contra war. Instead of emphasizing the costs of war to U.S. soldiers, an argument based on self-interest, the ACWC emphasized the costs of war to the Nicaraguan people, challenging U.S. citizens to recognize the effects of U.S. policies on others.

One significant controversy arose in the ACWC over political goals, following Congressional approval of \$27 million in non-military aid to the Contras in 1985. The vast majority of activist groups opposed any kind of Contra aid, but there were not enough votes in Congress to achieve this. There were, however, just enough votes to restrict military aid while allowing for “non-lethal” aid to the Contras—a compromise proposal introduced by “moderates.” Rep. David Bonior, Democrat of Michigan and an ally of the ACWC, and William LeoGrande, who worked with the House Democratic Caucus Task Force on Central America in 1985-1986, urged activist groups *not* to oppose the “non-lethal” aid package should proposals to ban all aid fail—which they did—because failure to approve the “non-lethal” aid package would most likely lead to passage of full military aid. Activists groups were divided over the wisdom of this strategy. Some did as Bonior and LeoGrande asked, while others criticized the House leadership for “selling out” the ACWC (LeoGrande, 2006). Yet the “non-lethal” aid package was the best the ACWC could get out of Congress after 1985.

Educational Themes

By their nature, educational themes are more varied than political goals, but some degree of consensus is necessary in order to present a coherent set of rationales to the public. At a minimum, internal schisms should be avoided. In the ACWC, the potentially explosive issue of support for revolutionary violence that had divided Leftists and pacifists in past antiwar movements (Muste, 1967) was eased by the fact that most Leftists did not publicly advocate revolution, and most pacifists did not condemn Nicaraguans for taking up revolution (AFSC, 1981). Both agreed that Nicaraguans should be allowed to determine their own destiny. Secondly, in the interest of building a broad based campaign, most Leftists avoided such hot-button terms as “socialism” to describe the Sandinista experiment and “imperialism” to describe U.S. foreign policy (Collins and Barber, 1990, 17). Thirdly, peace and religious liberals were mollified by the fact that the Sandinista government moved toward democracy (national elections were held in November 1984), outlawed the death penalty, and promoted a mixed economy, all of which eased fears that Nicaragua would become an authoritarian Leftist state similar to Cuba. U.S. Leftists could thus express solidarity with the FSLN without unduly grating upon liberal sensibilities.

In the religious community, liberation theology—a mix of Christian values and Marxist economic analyses—seemed to have its effect on North America as well as Latin America. In Nicaragua, the advent of liberation theology in the 1960s stimulated the development of Christian Base Communities and a “popular church” that grew closer to the FSLN and further from the conservative Catholic hierarchy (Dodson and O’Shaughnessy, 1990). In the U.S., religious progressives drew closer to the socialist Left and further from the religious right. Leftists, meanwhile, became more enthused with the Chilean model of social change than with the Cuban revolutionary model, thus facilitating alliances with liberal and pacifist groups (Hellman, 1997). Sociologist Sharon Nepstad, in her dissertation on the “U.S.-Nicaragua Solidarity Movement,” interviewed thirty-two U.S. citizens who had participated in harvest brigades in Nicaragua during the 1980s and found “two ideological orientations . . . predominant in the movement: people of faith and socialists.” These “two categories were often overlapping,” she noted, such that “many Christian solidarity activists were also socialists” (Nepstad, 1996, 62-63, 134-35). Indeed, Nicaragua Network was initiated with the help of religious activists and its first full-time coordinator, David Funkhouser, was an Episcopal priest (Funkhouser, 2006).

Leftists and liberals nevertheless continued to have their differences, particularly over the most appropriate educational themes to promote. Liberals preferred moderate themes that would presumably appeal to policymakers, the media, and the general public, while Leftists and radical critics tended to praise positive developments in Sandinista Nicaragua and broadly and harshly criticize U.S. foreign policy. These differences were minimized by the fact that both liberals and radicals promoted the more moderate themes,

thus making such themes the common currency of the ACWC. These included the danger of “another Vietnam,” the need for diplomacy and respect for international law (the principle of non-intervention or self-determination), the internal sources of revolution; the immorality of Contra attacks on civilians, and the illegality of administration actions. One could advocate these themes without necessarily challenging ideological assumptions regarding the nature of the “communist threat” and the overall beneficence of U.S. foreign policy. The radical approach, on the other hand, turned the administration’s world-view on its head: Instead of Contras being “freedom fighters,” they were terrorists and the U.S. was thus supporting terrorism; instead of the Sandinistas being “evil,” they were struggling to achieve, out of a history of repressive and inequitable policies, a society in which people had a measure of economic security and dignity; instead of the U.S. being the champion of freedom and democracy, it was acting as a traditional hegemonic power attempting to control Central America and suppress progressive social reform; and instead of the Soviet Union being the source of social unrest in the world, it was a minor player in Central America, posing no real threat to the U.S. or the region.

As almost all members of Congress took a dim view of the Sandinistas, pushing the argument that the Sandinistas were attempting to create a new humanistic socialist experiment did not seem to liberals to be useful or wise. The more politically astute approach, they reasoned, was to avoid debate over the internal nature of Sandinista Nicaragua. The problem with this approach, arguably, was that it allowed the administration to frame the debate to its advantage. By not contesting the allegedly “totalitarian” nature of the Sandinistas, the administration could make the case that the Sandinistas could not be trusted to keep agreements, thereby rendering all diplomatic efforts futile; and that the Sandinistas were intent on spreading revolution, setting up Soviet bases, and establishing totalitarian states, thus providing stronger justification for U.S. intervention. The anti-Contra-war campaign could hardly cede so much ideological territory and still expect to win the debate over Contra aid. More progressively minded activists thus saw no advantage in narrowing arguments to those acceptable to policymakers and the media (Walker, 2007). This division within the ACWC was played out mainly in Washington, where liberal lobbying groups did not want to be publicly associated with pro-Sandinista groups, even though they worked together in organizing grassroots lobbying campaigns.

National Coordination of Activities within the Anti-Contra-War Campaign

Virtually all activists recognized the need for some degree of national coordination of activities for reasons of both efficiency and effectiveness. It was hardly worthwhile for one national group to call for a national “day of action” without the support of other national and local organizations. To be considered a credible movement by the press and

to generate enthusiasm within the movement, the ACWC needed to turn out sizable numbers of people at events across the country. The more coordinated the events, the more likely that the movement would be noticed. The more agreement on a common set of educational themes, the more likely that these themes would be amplified in the press and local communities, and would influence the public discourse.

However beneficial it would be to form a national coalition opposed to the Contra war, there were strong forces working in the opposite direction. Sociologist Robert Kleidman (1993) identified one of these forces—the tendency of coalitions to overshadow the roles of participating organizations. The problem is that the coalition, rather than its organizational members, becomes identified by the media and public as spokesperson for movement and is credited with any accomplishments. This can have a debilitating effect on financial and membership support for the participating groups, which have to prove their worth to potential supporters.

Apart from the organizational imperative to survive, forming a stable coalition requires agreement on the following six sets of questions: 1) which political issues to address, how many (single- versus multi-issue), and how to prioritize those issues; 2) how to frame issues in terms of educational themes and arguments (moderate versus radical critiques); 3) which political goals to pursue, both short-term and long-term (moderate reform versus transformational goals); 4) what kind of outreach tactics to pursue (conventional versus confrontational) and how to integrate them (political, educational, direct action, and direct aid activities); 5) what kind of image to project and which constituencies to target for support (mainstream versus progressive, grassroots versus elite, religious versus secular, etc.); and 6) what kind of coalition structure would best serve the movement (centralized versus decentralized). Different answers to these questions provide the basis for different groups. Forming a permanent coalition or federation, moreover, as was done by West German peace groups in the 1980s, does not automatically resolve these questions and may actually result in more friction (Cooper, 1996).

In the ACWC, agreement on short-term goals (number 3 above) provided much of the glue for the campaign, allowing for differences in other areas. Many organizations did not want to go beyond this level of cooperation. Leftist groups wanted to maintain their radical critique of U.S. foreign policy. Moderate-liberal groups sought to preserve their mainstream image. Religious groups wanted to safeguard their religious identity. For SANE, the question was how far to go beyond their bread-and-butter issue of disarmament in taking on Central America issues. SANE director David Cortright (2006) reflected, “We became engaged and, to some extent, supportive of Central America work, but at the end of the day, we put most of our resources into nuclear weapons campaigns.... That was our identity.” Any coordination of activities within the ACWC required a balance between respect for organizational autonomy and the need to create an efficient and effective campaign.

Political Lobbying

The most successful coordination that took place within the ACWC was on the legislative front. The Central America Working Group (CAWG) was the go-to organization. Representatives from different national organizations met weekly to plan legislative strategy and divide tasks. On key bills, they typically divided up the country in getting the word out to local contacts. Leftist, religious, and peace groups all participated. “CAWG was the main place where everyone sat together,” said Margaret Swedish, director of the Religious Task Force on Central America. “That became the coalition for everybody in Washington.” Organizational representatives had “their own rhetoric and logic,” she noted, but “we worked together on singular goals.” Yvonne Dilling, director of Witness for Peace (WFP), described CAWG in similar terms, saying, “We coordinated strategy—we tried not to duplicate efforts. . . . Everybody had their strengths.” The particular strengths of WFP lay in having available for lobbying hundreds of U.S. citizens who had personally seen the effects of the Contra war. “What WFP did was provide a never-ending stream of people who would bother their Congresspersons,” said Dilling, “so when CAWG wanted to talk with aides in twenty-five offices, they had this huge pool to do it.” The cooperation that developed within CAWG arguably had a positive effect on the wider Central America movement, encouraging activists to see themselves as part of a coordinated campaign. “That was our best—working cooperatively,” said Richard Healey, director of the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy (Swedish, 2007; Dilling, 2007; Healey, 2006).

The main problem in the legislative arena involved building a stronger grassroots base to reinforce Washington lobby efforts, particularly in the districts of members of Congress considered “swing voters” on the Contra aid issue. According to CAWG coordinator Cindy Buhl, “We really needed to develop more sophisticated, over-arching, long-term, targeted field campaign for swing-states, to hire crack field staff to go in and organize. . . . But there was never money for long-term work” (Smith, 1996, 366-67).

Washington based national organizations attempted to address this problem, at least in part, by forming the Central America Peace Campaign (CAPC) in early 1984. CAPC’s two main goals were to increase grassroots pressure on “swing” members of Congress and to establish a Central America peace plank in the Democratic party platform that year. By mid-1984, sixteen national organizations were serving on the CAPC steering committee, including religious, peace, Leftist, and Washington policy groups (CAPC, 1984). Relying on grant funds, CAPC hired field staff to assist local groups in targeted Congressional districts. Meanwhile, CAPC representatives successfully lobbied delegates at the Democratic party national convention in July to adopt a peace plank in the party platform, which stated, “We must terminate our support for the Contras and other paramilitary groups fighting in Nicaragua” (“Democratic Party Platform,” 1984). CAPC’s potential for coordinating and representing the Central America movement was cut short due to a shortage of funds at the end of 1984. CAPC

revived the next spring and carried out small-scale grassroots organizing drives before finally dissolving in late 1986. Although the ACWC had a strong grassroots basis, this did not necessarily translate into political strength, as the most active local groups tended to be located in Congressional districts where members of Congress opposed the Contra war. (Local organizing is further discussed in sections below.)

Educational Outreach

There was no single organization comparable to CAWC or CAPC working in educational outreach, but groups shared resources and information in the interest of presenting common themes and arguments to the public. Witness for Peace was particularly effective in sharing information, much of which was not readily available in the mainstream press. WFP volunteers in Nicaragua documented Contra attacks and other developments in Nicaragua and relayed this information from the WFP Managua office to the Washington office, where it was repackaged into press releases, newsletters, “hotlines,” and talking points for use by activist groups. The decentralized nature of the ACWC allowed for differences among Leftist, religious, and peace groups, but also inhibited a strategic educational-outreach plan and coordination. There was no designated spokesperson to whom the media could turn for commentary. Hence, the media usually turned to members of Congress to articulate the anti-Contra position.

Groups did join together in holding annual Central America weeks each March, commemorating the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. Promoted by the Religious Task Force on Central America and the Inter-religious Task Force on Central America, these weeks became movement-wide vehicles for educational and protest activities, and often attracted positive media attention. In March 1986, for example, the *New York Times* reported activities organized by the New Jersey Central America Network (NJCAN). NJCAN director Barbra Apfelbaum told the newspaper that the week’s activities were designed “to reach as many citizens as possible and to urge them to influence their lawmakers to stop U.S. dollars from paying for military support in Nicaragua and El Salvador” (Squires, 1986; Apfelbaum, 2007).

Protest Demonstrations

Coordination of protests in the ACWC developed along two lines. The first involved organizing large multi-issue national demonstrations—in the spirit of past anti-Vietnam-war mobilizations. Three such demonstrations took place in Washington, D.C.—in November 1983, April 1985, and April 1987. The first focused on U.S. policies toward Central America and the Caribbean and drew about 20,000 people (Peri and Murphy, 1983). The planning committee brought together representatives from more than a dozen organizations and served as a useful forum for communication beyond planning the event. The second mass demonstration had a broader agenda: disarmament,

military-spending reductions, anti-interventionism, and opposition to South African apartheid “and racism here at home.” This multi-issue agenda was designed to draw a broad spectrum of constituencies, which it did, but it also diluted the Contra war issue to the point that the media hardly noted it. Coming at a time when the Reagan administration was conducting an all-out push for Contra aid, the ACWC was arguably not well served by this demonstration. Over 60 organizations cosponsored the demonstration, which drew 26,000 people, according to U.S. Park Police, and 100,000 people, according to rally organizers (Well and Engle, 1985). The third major demonstration focused more narrowly on Central America and South Africa, with the former being central. Religious and labor organizations were presented as the formal sponsors of the demonstration, but decisions were made by an organizing committee that consisted of representatives from 21 activist groups along with representatives from religious denominations and labor unions. Rally organizers estimated that 100,000 people gathered for the main rally, of whom about one-third were union members (King, 1987).

In a detailed report on the April 1987 Mobilization and the six-month organizing period leading up to it, scholars Beverly Bickel, Philip Brenner, and William LeoGrande (1987), identified a number of deficiencies. In the rush to organize the demonstration and accompanying events, they judged that staff had been hastily hired and not well trained in some cases; outreach to the African American community had been inadequate; educational materials for grassroots organizers had been delayed, thus inhibiting local outreach efforts; the apartheid issue had been only superficially addressed; relations with the media had been largely neglected; and no effort had been made to include supportive members of Congress. The authors deemed the latter to be a failure of major importance, as it limited the political impact of the demonstration. They concluded that the deficiencies of the April 1987 Mobilization were rooted in the disjointed condition of the overall peace and justice movement, which lacked “a stable and ongoing forum for political discussion and debate, such as a progressive political party or national organization.”

The second line of national coordinated protests involved the Pledge of Resistance (POR), a campaign to sign up thousands of U.S. citizens who would pledge to commit civil disobedience or acts of legal protest in the event of a U.S. invasion of Nicaragua. The pledge idea was born at a conference attended by 53 representatives of religious peace organizations in November 1983, one week after the U.S. invasion of Grenada. Over the next year, the pledge idea was modified to include other potential U.S. aggression in Central America and it became secularized. It became, in the words of POR national coordinator Ken Butigan, the “direct action arm of the movement.” The first pledge sign-up took place in San Francisco in October 1984. The Pledge campaign spread quickly thereafter, as local groups found it a useful mobilizing tool. By the end of 1984, 42,000 people had signed the pledge nationwide; by end of the decade, 100,000 had done so, according to Butigan (2006, 6-7). The Pledge campaign was beset with

coordination problems, as local groups sometimes initiated calls to action on their own, and the continual stream of bills and votes in Congress did not lend itself to nationally coordinated timing of actions. Also, in Congressional districts where representatives opposed Contra aid, local protests made little sense. The Pledge campaign nevertheless successfully carried out something close to its original mission in calling for nationwide protests against the introduction of U.S. troops into Honduras in March 1988.

Although the Pledge of Resistance (POR) and Central America Peace Campaign (CAPC) both sought to unify the Central America movement in certain respects—lobbying and protests—the two campaigns were not themselves coordinated. This led to competition and overlap at times. In January 1984, for example, CAPC (1984) introduced a petition, “Pledge for Non-Intervention in Central America,” at the very time that POR was circulating its Pledge. The POR pledge proved to be the more popular and the CAPC petition fell by the wayside.

Humanitarian Aid and Sister Cities

Unlike the Vietnam war, when raising humanitarian aid for the North Vietnamese people was considered by many to be radical in the extreme, if not traitorous, raising humanitarian aid for the Nicaraguan people became almost faddish in the 1980s. As more and more U.S. citizens traveled to Nicaragua—an estimated 100,000 during the decade (Membreño Idiáquez, 1997)—many came back to create or participate in humanitarian aid and sister-city programs. In mid-1985, following Congressional approval of \$27 million in non-military aid to the Contras, Quixote Center founders Bill Callahan and Dolly Pomerleau initiated the Quest for Peace campaign, which was designed to match that amount in real humanitarian aid for the Nicaraguan people. The Quixote Center facilitated local aid efforts by spreading the word, making small start-up grants available, collecting goods in its warehouse, and shipping the goods in twenty-ton cargo containers. Callahan, a Jesuit priest and former physicist, furthermore kept track of all material and in-kind donations contributed by U.S. citizens and groups, and judged that the goal of \$27 million was surpassed in less than a year. When Congress approved \$100 million in military and non-military aid the following year, the process was successfully repeated at the higher amount. Over 600 U.S. organizations took part in these aid efforts. The aid took the form of educational and medical supplies, clothes, agricultural tools, and materials for building a hospital in the northern rural community of El Viejo (Callahan and Pomerleau, 2006; Quixote Center, 1986, 2006). In addition to aiding the Nicaraguan people, humanitarian aid projects had a salutary effect on organizing, increasing outreach, and helping to sustain activist interest and energy.

Sister-city projects were facilitated by the Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua (WCCN). WCCN worked with the Nicaraguan Embassy in Washington to streamline sister-city project procedures, offered advice and technical assistance to new local projects, and organized periodic sister-city conferences, including one in Managua

in 1988. The number of U.S.-Nicaragua sister cities grew from ten in 1985, to 84 in 1988, joining over 200 Western European-Nicaraguan pairings (Chilsen and Rampton, 1988, 6-7). Most of these people-to-people programs operated with official approval, involving a broad range of citizens in local communities.

Decentralization and its Discontents

Beyond the specific activity areas discussed above, there were general problems in coordination of the ACWC, particularly between national and local groups. Lacking a shared strategic plan for grassroots organizing, each national group or some combination of groups developed plans of their own. The result was overlap and competition among national groups for local participation and, from the perspective of local groups, inundation with requests from national groups. As Eric Fried, a local organizer in Santa Rosa, California, described it (1986), "National and regional offices of all the groups compete for the limited energy and money of local, grassroots groups, often leading locals to a sense of being overwhelmed and frustrated." Local groups had less money and fewer staff with which to work, but were nonetheless expected to implement the numerous plans designed by national groups. This was a point of discord. National groups, in turn, fretted over whether their plans would actually be implemented at the local level. They also gained little financial support from local groups, even their own chapters, leading some national organizers to feel they were giving more than they were receiving.

David Reed, director of Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, expressed frustration with the disorganized state of the Central America movement, writing (1986, 2-3) that it was "for the most part, reactive, unable to anticipate and prepare for coming events." He bemoaned "the absence of a clear division-of-labor among the many groups in the anti-intervention movement" and the related problem of "turf protection." Van Gosse, who served in the 1980s as a staff person for the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, found much to praise in the ACWC and Central America movement, but similarly criticized (2006, 1995, 39) the lack of overall coordination: "What is missing is some central leadership, from Nicaragua Network . . . or someone else, in the form of sustained campaigns of public education and action." LeoGrande, despite his pointed criticisms of the April 1987 Mobilization, maintained a more positive view of overall coordination, saying, "You had a degree of division of labor" and the "coordination of groups was quite good." The fact that there were so many different groups was "appropriate as different constituencies were reached." To force "everyone into one mold was unnecessary," he argued (2006).

One can look at the coordination of the ACWC in terms of the glass half-full or half-empty. Compared to the anti-Vietnam-war movement, the ACWC was more organized and cooperative, particularly in the political arena. Given that it was largely a volunteer effort, its endurance is commendable. On the other hand, it needed better

coordination between national and local groups, more agreement on educational themes, and designated persons or groups to represent the ACWC in the media and political fora.

At a deeper level, factors inhibiting coalition building need to be addressed over time, in this author's view. There is a need for "a stable and ongoing forum for political discussion and debate," as noted by Bickel, Brenner, and LeoGrande (1987, 51), one objective of which would be to develop long-term goals and visions beyond immediate campaigns. If general agreement on these can be reached, the next step would be to develop a long-term grassroots organizing plan aimed at establishing a more permanent infrastructure of peace and justice groups, and an educational plan aimed at "consciousness-raising" and shifting the ideological paradigm—e.g., analyzing and offering alternatives to the U.S. role of "world policeman." When new issues arise, the peace movement would be in a much better position to develop new campaigns. These campaigns, in turn, would theoretically help build the infrastructure of the movement (Peace, 1994).

Historical Perspective

What is most important about the ACWC from an historical perspective is that it existed and endured. Thirty years earlier, there was virtually no protest movement against another egregious CIA-directed military operation in Central America—the overthrow of the reform-minded Arbenz government in Guatemala in 1954. That U.S. citizens spoke out against the Contra war in the 1980s indicates a new level of awareness and progressive activism, at least among a portion of U.S. citizens. Nevertheless, the ACWC cannot claim success in stopping the Contra war. Nor did it have a larger visible effect on U.S. policy, as the Contra war was bracketed by the U.S. invasion of Grenada in October 1983, and of Panama in December 1989, both of which reinforced U.S. hegemony and militarism. Unlike the small anti-imperialist movement that opposed U.S. intervention in Nicaragua in the 1920s, no Good Neighbor Policy followed. The ACWC did, however, further democratic debate over U.S. foreign policy, cultivate empathy for people beyond U.S. borders, and promote international diplomacy. The latter traits are in keeping with developments in Europe and other parts of the world. Since World War II, European nations have been moving away from imperialism, hegemonic spheres of influence, militarism, and unbridled nationalism. Being in line with this movement, the anti-Contra-war campaign arguably represented the best of the United States, and perhaps its future.

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