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HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY, 1981-1988

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DEFINING RIGHTS: CONTESTING THE CONTRA WAR THROUGH
HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY, 1981-1988

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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To Acacia – Thank you. You pushed me, you supported me, and you made it possible.

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This project took shape from a conversation in a legal history course with Kathleen Brosnan about the shortcomings of international law. I expressed my disappointment that international law, historically, seemed to reinforce inequality, empire, and intervention. Though I do not recall the exact wording, Dr. Brosnan asked if human rights changed things, changed the focus or effect of international law—a deceptively simple question. I cannot remember how I responded, but I do know that through the end of my course work and comprehensive exams I continued thinking about how human rights and different conceptions of law influenced U.S. foreign relations. My focus narrowed considerably, but this dissertation is my attempt to explore that basic curiosity.

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ABSTRACT

Non-governmental organizations successfully limited U.S. support of counterrevolutionary guerrillas (Contras) in Nicaragua in the 1980s by advocating for peace through a lexicon of human rights. NGOs deployed their message of opposition through a variety of methods, but the mobilization of thousands of activists rallying around the cause of human rights in public demonstrations proved most effective for influencing policy. In addition, the work of NGOs altered the debate over the Contra War and framed the policy issue as a question of human rights and not question of geopolitics and anti-communism.

Conflicting ideas about human rights underpinned the policy debate and the tension between the two governments. NGOs opposing the Reagan administration's Contra policy and Cold War interpretations of international relations then-prevalent in Washington adhered to what this dissertation refers to as the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse. These organizations and developing nations throughout the world interpreted human rights as including economic, social, and cultural rights, collective rights of self-determination and national sovereignty, and political and civil rights. Meanwhile, the Reagan administration followed the Democratic Human Rights discourse, which elevated political and civil rights above all other rights. Reagan believed that protecting democracy ultimately protected human rights and that the Contras, or freedom fighters as Reagan referred to them, fought for democracy. The Sandinista government objected to foreign interference and U.S. support of an insurrection while NGOs also rejected the violation of Nicaragua sovereignty and the use of violence to achieve policy objectives.

TWO SIDES OF A COIN: HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE CONTRA WAR

On July 19, 1982, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN or Sandinistas) celebrated the third anniversary of the Nicaraguan Revolution's victory over Anastasio Somoza Debayle, which had ended decades of authoritarian rule by the Somoza family dynasty. In the city of Masaya, Daniel Ortega Saavedra, coordinator of the Junta of the National Reconstruction Government, spoke about the rights of the Nicaraguan people and of the opportunities provided by the new government. Nicaraguans now enjoyed the right to freely organize in unions and associations. Nicaraguans also won the right to guide their own economy so that citizens had the means to provide for their families. After three years, the agrarian reform recovered vast tracts of land for distribution to more than six thousand families, cooperatives, and individuals. As small producers gained greater access to land, rural farmers enjoyed access to credit that had not existed before the Sandinistas took power. Ortega touted a much-improved health care system, bolstered by an additional \$200 million for the nation's hospitals. Those hospitals treated more than double the number of people they had under the Somoza regime. In addition, the country reduced the illiteracy rate from 50.3 percent to 12.9 percent. Ortega also celebrated the building of 6,500 kilometers of roads since the triumph.¹

However, danger lurked, and Ortega warned of the struggle ahead. Nicaragua was under attack from individuals who would roll back the hard-won rights and

¹ Daniel Ortega Saavedra, "Discurso Del Comandante de La Revolución, Daniel Ortega Saavedra, Coordinador de La JGRN," *Tercer Aniversario de La Revolución Popular Sandinista Y Veintiun Aniversario de La Fundacion Del FSLN*, July 19, 1982, 67–75, Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica.

opportunities of the revolution. He reminded Nicaraguans they needed to fight to defend their progress. The people should prepare to follow the example of the legendary Augusto César Sandino's soldiers, sacrificing and fighting for their homes against foreign intervention. To that end, Ortega celebrated the brave Sandinista military standing against the *contrarevolucionarios* (Contras) who were armed, trained, and funded by the United States. Ortega proclaimed that the greatest resource against the U.S. intervention was the courage of Nicaraguans "defending their sovereign right to have the weapons and technical means needed to guarantee their health, education, production, freedom to organize their homeland."²

Human rights groups who monitored conditions in Nicaragua described a different scenario, one in which Ortega's regime represented a threat to Nicaraguan rights, not a defense of them. Amnesty International (AI) reported that the Sandinistas suspended the right of habeas corpus, which allowed individuals to challenge the legitimacy of their detention and prevent arbitrary arrests by government officials.³ The Sandinistas then arrested and prosecuted political dissenters and labor organizers simply for their association or political activity. The Nicaraguan military forced the evacuation and relocation of entire villages of indigenous people, approximately 8,500, along Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast with only hours' notice. Military officials ordered the villages burned, property destroyed, and livestock slaughtered. In addition, the Sandinistas engaged in large-scale arrests of Miskito Indians before and during the relocation, detaining approximately 135

² Ibid., 73, 82-83.

³ *Nicaragua Background Briefing: Persistence of Public Order Law Detentions and Trials* (New York: Amnesty International Publications, 1982), 2.

individuals, most held without cause or suspicion of wrongdoing. AI concluded that many of the arrests took place to intimidate and influence community leaders and church officials, a violation of individual liberty and a method of governing used by autocrats.⁴

The differences in interpretation by Ortega and AI reflected a fundamental disagreement over the hierarchy of rights. The Sandinistas claimed that the U.S. intervention, through a proxy guerrilla force, threatened Nicaraguan sovereignty and self-determination, rights the Sandinistas elevated above all others. From those rights the FSLN could ensure other human rights for Nicaraguans. AI did not take a position on the counterrevolution or the politics of the Sandinistas, but AI did reject the notion that Nicaraguans should sacrifice rights of due process, bodily integrity, and fair trials.

Complicating the issue further, no consensus definition or method of enforcement existed for human rights. Activists and world leaders did agree that Nicaraguans faced repression, violence, and other abuses. However, without an agreement over who committed the violations and what rights should be defended, governments could not agree on a policy for protecting human rights. The administrations of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan even disagreed over the influence human rights should have over U.S. foreign policy. Carter and human rights advocates in the United States called for an expansive definition of human rights in the United States and a larger role for human rights in foreign policy. Reagan minimized the importance of human rights outside the context of fighting

⁴ Ibid., 3–10.

communism and promoting democracy. As such, Reagan supported the Contras fighting against the supposedly communist Sandinista government.

The ideological divide over human rights in Nicaragua mirrored the intellectual development of human rights in the post-war era as two competing discourses emerged. What this study calls the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse, prominent in the developing world, arose in defiance of foreign intervention, oppression, and inequality. It recognized political and civil rights. It also included social, economic, and cultural rights along with collective rights of national sovereignty and self-determination. Within this discourse, a hierarchy of rights arose in which governments of developing nations tended to value national sovereignty and self-determination first, followed by social, economic, and cultural rights, and then, finally, political and civil rights. What this dissertation dubs the Democratic Human Rights discourse, meanwhile, expressed a conservative approach to government while demonizing the Soviet Union and what advocates saw as global communism. The Democratic Human Rights discourse recognized as human rights political and civil rights and minimized, if not excluded, sovereignty and self-determination and social, economic, and cultural rights. The Sandinistas and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) advocating for peace in Nicaragua adhered to the Anticolonial discourse, though they disagreed on the hierarchy of rights recognized within that discourse. The United States government during the Carter administration accepted the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse as a legitimate expression of human rights, but both the Carter and Reagan administrations articulated foreign policy in Democratic Human Rights terms. That is not to say that

advocates for democracy in Nicaragua all shunned economic rights or vice-versa. Overlap occurred among the separate but parallel discourses, but this study reveals how the differences between those objectives that led to the separate discourses influenced international relations.

Amid these differing views over definition and hierarchy of rights, NGOs advocating for peace in Nicaragua successfully used human rights discourse against President Reagan to limit U.S. support for the counterrevolution and help end the Contra War. Through a combination of grassroots activism, Congressional lobbying, and human rights investigations and reporting, these organizations worked to reframe the Contra War as an issue of human rights and not Cold War anti-communism. In doing so, NGOs contributed to a shift in the political discourse over Nicaragua in which human rights became a required talking point and consideration in foreign policy. If Reagan spoke about Nicaragua and human rights, he initially did so in vague terms, choosing instead to emphasize Nicaragua as a pawn of the Soviet Union. NGOs forced Reagan to adopt human rights as part of a public diplomacy strategy and as a military and political strategy in Nicaragua, though only nominally.

The debate over human rights as they related to the Contra War reflected larger challenges in international relations in applying principles of law to disputes involving a major power such as the United States. Ironically, in the case of Nicaragua, domestic non-state actors pressed for the enforcement of internationally accepted legal principles in human rights through political means and sought to define America's interpretation of human rights. With no international institutions empowered to force governments to abide by international law or a clearly defined

understanding of human rights, local grassroots mobilization and activism served as an alternative.

Organizations such as the Nicaraguan Network and the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy (later renamed the Coalition for a New Foreign Policy or CFNFP) built networks of contacts throughout the country with whom they communicated to activate thousands of concerned citizens for demonstrations, media work, and public education programs to protest U.S. Nicaragua policy. They also built up lobbying operations in Washington to leverage their influence in Congress against the Contras. Investigations by NGOs such as AI, Americas Watch (AW), and the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) revealed the widespread, systemic human rights abuse committed by the Contras as NGOs reinforced the argument that the abuse came with funding from the United States. These NGOs worked to shine a light on the violence and destruction created by the U.S.-funded Contra War by producing reports based on interviews and affidavits from victims and witnesses of the abuse. Representatives from the NGOs also testified before Congress regarding the investigations and briefed Congressional staffers on conditions in Nicaragua.

The debate over the meaning of human rights and the influence human rights should have on U.S. foreign policy contributed to a larger debate over human rights in international law and politics that began during World War II. In 1941, on board the USS *Augusta* off the coast of Newfoundland, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt met the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, to discuss war objectives. At the so-called Atlantic Conference, the two leaders drafted the Atlantic Charter, which

adopted Roosevelt's heretofore domestic Four Freedoms—freedom of speech and religion and from want and fear—as global standards. The Atlantic Charter reimagined the individual's relationship to international law, acknowledging the possibility that international law could apply directly to the individual and not just sovereign states. This principle underpinned the concept of human rights. By stripping away the intervening layer of the state, human rights law empowered the individual with standing to assert claims against the state or other entity for violations of fundamental rights.⁵

Even in the 1940s, the Four Freedoms and human rights received varied interpretations, and these would persist through the twentieth century. FDR's government believed that each nation had a responsibility to ensure the financial security and welfare of its citizens. Roosevelt and post-war planners foresaw international institutions empowered to protect the economic opportunity and prosperity of citizens around the world, which would also help ensure international security. However, more conservative-minded Americans interpreted the Four Freedoms as an assertion of individual liberty, self-reliance, and domestic consumption.⁶

After the war, the Allies formed a new international order around the ideals of the Atlantic Conference, beginning with the United Nations (UN) in 1945.⁷ The UN then created the Commission on Human Rights to define and formalize the

⁵ Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 46–61.

⁷ *The Charter of the United Nations* (United Nations, 1945), <http://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations/index.html>.

mechanisms for defending human rights. The Commission ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, whose preamble stated, “Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in cooperation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms.”⁸ The UDHR recognized political freedoms and civil rights Americans long considered fundamental to a functioning society and civic life such as “life, liberty, and security of person,” the right to be free from torture and slavery, the right to equality before the law and due process, the right to privacy, the right to free exercise of religion, and the right to freedom of expression. Yet the UDHR went further and followed Roosevelt’s apparent intentions for international governance that considered economic, social, and cultural rights as human rights, such as the right to a living wage to provide for one’s family, the right to social services for financial and personal security, and the right to education.⁹

In 1966, the UN refined its conception of human rights while clarifying the distinction in the types of rights through the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. These covenants recognized the rights of individuals not as citizens of a nation but as members of a global community entitled to certain dignity in life and their person and economic and social opportunity. Both covenants provided that

[I]n accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ideal of free human beings enjoying civil and political freedom and freedom from fear and want can only be achieved if conditions are created whereby

⁸ *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948), <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2–8.

everyone may enjoy his civil and political rights, as well as his economic, social and cultural rights....¹⁰

Both covenants also proclaimed the right to self-determination to enable people to “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”¹¹ The Covenant on Civil and Political Rights declared that each nation must respect the rights of individuals without regard for race, ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation. It also addressed rights related to due process, equal protection under the law, freedom from arbitrary or cruel punishment and torture, freedom of speech, religion, and association, and other civil rights.¹² The Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights affirmed rights to organize trade unions, to livable wages, to strike, to social security insurance, to marriage through mutual consent, to paid leave for childbirth for working mothers, to adequate and nutritious food and access to clothing and housing, and to the right of free primary education for all.¹³ The covenants clearly established these rights as a part of international law but also explicitly made what had only been an intellectual distinction among rights, bolstering the position of those who ranked one class of rights over the other.

Read together, these documents fulfilled an expectation originally put forward by Roosevelt in his New Deal legislation of the 1930s that ran counter to a powerful tradition in the United States of valuing political and civil rights above all other rights. As Americans faced the Great Depression and as social upheaval

¹⁰ “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights” (United Nations, 1966), 1, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>.

¹¹ “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,” 2; “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” (United Nations, 1966), 1, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>.

¹² “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.”

¹³ “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” 2–5.

plagued nations throughout the world, FDR concluded that freedom required economic and social stability, without which people could not benefit from their political freedom and civil liberties.¹⁴ However, the U.S. Constitution established a federal government that governed through restraint, holding only those powers granted to it by the people. The Bill of Rights reaffirmed specific limits on the government to ensure liberty. Subsequent Constitutional amendments expanded the scope of freedom and American democracy but did not create obligations on the government to provide social goods, such as health care or housing, or economic benefits, such as employment. Not until the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century reform movements did Americans experiment with social welfare services and financial protections, though still not as rights.¹⁵ Even the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century focused on civil liberties, such as the right to vote and the equal protection under the law. Toward the end of the 1960s and 1970s, activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr., identified structural problems in American society that would not be cured through political and civil rights. In the final years of his life, King saw racial injustice as part of a bigger issue of social and economic injustice. King argued that without equal access to employment and other economic

¹⁴ Matthew Jones, "Freedom from Want," in *The Four Freedoms: Franklin Roosevelt and the Evolution of an American Idea*, ed. Jeffrey Engel (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 125–27.

¹⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955); Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005); Andrew Wender Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress: Chicago and the Struggle for the Modern American Economy, 1900-1940*, Cambridge Historical Studies in American Law and Society (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

opportunities, African Americans, and anyone else, could not realize the freedom to which they were entitled.¹⁶

The UDHR and the subsequent covenants recognized the importance of both categories of rights, Anticolonial and Democratic, but the U.S. Congress refused to follow. Domestic politics caused the U.S. government to withdraw from the international human rights movement in the 1950s. Eleanor Roosevelt served as Washington's most visible and celebrated delegate to the commission drafting the UDHR. Segregationists interpreted her criticism of civil rights in the United States and international human rights agreements as threats to established racial order. In addition, anti-communists in Congress declared the Human Rights Commission and the UDHR part of a communist conspiracy. Under pressure from both groups, President Dwight Eisenhower pulled the United States out of the Commission. The Senate did not ratify the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights until 1992, and it never ratified the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.¹⁷

Beginning in the 1950s, anti-communism dominated U.S. Cold War foreign policy and overshadowed concerns with human rights.¹⁸ Officials in the administration of Harry Truman considered communism and the Soviet Union a threat to American values and the very existence of the United States.¹⁹ These concerns led President Eisenhower and his successors to befriend authoritarian

¹⁶ Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 245–55.

¹⁷ Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 38–42.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

¹⁹ James S. Lay, Jr., Executive Secretary of the National Security Council, "A Report to the National Security Council on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security," April 14, 1950, Ideological Foundations of the Cold War, Harry S Truman Library and Museum, https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/index.php.

governments in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that could stand strong against communist insurgents. Repressive regimes supposedly defended democracy by fighting against the communists, and, when doing so, benefitted from U.S. friendship through military and economic aid. Washington tolerated the methods through which these regimes did their work because they fulfilled the bigger goal of defeating Soviet communism. Consequently, policies of anti-communism often had detrimental effects on human rights around the world.²⁰

Changes in international politics in the 1970s left the American people questioning the premise of the Cold War and how the United States could continue accepting human rights violations by its allies. With the coming of détente, China and the Soviet Union looked more like established, world powers operating within an international order and less like radical states seeking global revolution.²¹ Democrats in Congress found that the narrow focus on the Soviet Union no longer fit within the realities faced by the United States and grew more vocal in questioning Cold War orthodoxy.²² Americans also started to doubt that communists in Latin America posed any threat to U.S. national security.²³ Democrats wanted to incorporate human rights concerns into U.S. foreign policy and turn their attention to other regions that they believed presented more significant danger or opportunity.²⁴ Furthermore, media outlets and NGOs in the United States and in Latin America provided disturbing information about widespread violence, torture, and state-sponsored

²⁰ Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*, 40–42.

²¹ Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 145–46.

²² Scott Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 11; Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 145.

²³ Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 146.

²⁴ Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled*, 11.

terrorism by anti-communist authoritarians receiving U.S. aid.²⁵ Evidence of human rights abuses in Latin America raised questions about what Washington hoped to accomplish in Latin America and at what cost.²⁶

With the growing concern over the direction of U.S. foreign policy, Congress asserted more control over foreign relations in the 1970s. New laws limited the president's ability to take the country to war without Congressional approval and raised human rights as necessary components for U.S. foreign policy decisions.²⁷ Donald Fraser (D-MN) held hearings through the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the House Foreign Relations Committee. His subcommittee's 1974 report on human rights violations around the world formed the foundation for future U.S. human rights policy.²⁸ Investigations led by Senator Frank Church (D-ID) uncovered CIA involvement in plots to overthrow governments in Iran, Guatemala, and Chile, and to conduct assassinations in Indonesia and Cuba. Congress also passed the Harkin Amendment in 1975 to prevent sending economic aid to governments violating human rights. The International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act of 1976 called on Washington to refrain from aiding any government abusing human rights and required the Secretary of State to produce a

²⁵ Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); James N. Green, *We Cannot Remain Silent: Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Tanya Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); William Michael Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy toward Argentina* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

²⁶ Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 146.

²⁷ Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled*, 11.

²⁸ Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*, 48.

report documenting the human rights record of each nation receiving aid for security purposes.²⁹

Jimmy Carter embraced human rights as a candidate for president in 1976 and pledged a new moral foundation for foreign policy rather than continuing to adhere to the orthodox containment policy of the Cold War. Once in office, his administration adopted a definition of human rights consistent with the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse. Carter acknowledged that individuals of the developing world saw economic and social rights as the most significant rights of all, and, for the United States to value only political and civil rights, such as rights to vote, to free expression and association, and to bodily integrity, would be self-defeating.³⁰ Carter's emphasis on human rights and the appointment of activist Patricia Derian to lead the human rights agency within the State Department helped to significantly reduce the number of murders and disappearances in Latin America.³¹ Yet, Carter's desire to change the foundations of U.S. foreign policy only went so far. He still put geopolitics ahead of human rights when it came to critical Cold War allies such as the Philippines, Iran, Israel, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea. In Latin America, Carter remained reluctant to alienate countries like Argentina, Brazil, and Chile.³²

Carter's successor, Ronald Reagan, offered a stark contrast in human rights policy and in approach to foreign relations. After he received the Republican

²⁹ David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, "Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 28, no. 1 (January 2004): 118.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 119–26.

³¹ Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled*, 30; Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 147.

³² Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled*, 35–36.

nomination for president, Reagan declared that the United States would build peace by reasserting global power. He condemned the policies of Carter, arguing that “the cold, hard fact of the matter is that our economic, military, and strategic strength under President Carter is eroding.” Reagan and neoconservatives within his administration opposed détente and believed that U.S. weakness derived from policies of accommodation to the Soviets that began with Richard Nixon.³³ Neocons wanted to reassert U.S. dominance. In specifically addressing Carter’s human rights policy that involved Derian and other administration officials publicly shaming governments, Reagan stated that “[o]ur relations must be solidly based on shared economic and security interests, not upon mutual recrimination and insult.”³⁴ He accused the Carter administration of alienating allies and allowing the Soviets and Cubans to extend their influence in the vacuum of power.

Once in office, President Reagan wanted to confront the Soviet threat with massive military spending, increased nuclear capabilities, and aid for those resisting communism throughout the world, the so-called “Reagan Doctrine.”³⁵ Reagan sought to renew relationships with governments, including authoritarian regimes, that could help with resisting communism.³⁶ He accepted that some of these allies did not practice the same form of governance or hold the same values as the United States. Reagan determined that the best policy was to attempt to change their behavior and

³³ John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1994* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 136.

³⁴ Ronald W. Reagan, “A Strategy for Peace in the 80s” October 19, 1980, The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/major-speeches-index/10-archives/reference/12-10-19-80>.

³⁵ Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 157.

³⁶ William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 5.

institutions as a friend rather than removing U.S. support, offending an otherwise pro-U.S. leader, and risking a totalitarian takeover.³⁷

The new administration planned to deemphasize human rights while prioritizing international terrorism supported or directed by Moscow.³⁸ The administration did not want to push too hard to improve human rights because officials believed that such a stance unfairly pressured U.S. friends while leaving out adversaries, over whom the United States had no diplomatic influence. Rigid human rights policies also invited anti-democratic states to further drive a wedge between the United States and its allies and undermine those governments. The United States would no longer act for short-term gains against instances of repression or torture. Rather, the administration would pursue the long game, seeking gradual, fundamental change toward democracy and freedom. Administration officials would hold the United States out as an example of freedom and human rights for the world. However, the Reagan administration did plan to publicly condemn the human rights abuses of the Soviet bloc unilaterally and through institutions in the United Nations.³⁹

Central America offered a safe location for the United States to begin reasserting dominance, and Washington had little regard for that dominance's immediate effect on human rights given that the larger objective was establishing democracy. Neocons viewed the leftist revolutions in Central America as part of a

³⁷ "Excerpts From an Interview With Walter Cronkite of CBS News, March 3, 1981," in *Public Papers of the Presidents*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1981 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981).

³⁸ *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1981-1988, Volume XLI, Global Issues II, eds. Alexander O. Poster and Adam M. Howard (Washington: Government Publishing Office, 2017), Document 40.

³⁹ *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1981-1988, Volume XLI, Global Issues II, eds. Alexander O. Poster and Adam M. Howard (Washington: Government Publishing Office, 2017), Document 53.

Soviet mission to encircle the United States, which required a U.S. response of renewed international political authority and military power.⁴⁰ Officials also did not believe the Soviets would risk a military confrontation to protect communists in Central America.⁴¹ Central America also consisted of states governed by authoritarians who could carry out U.S. foreign policy objectives. In 1979, Reagan's future UN ambassador, Jeane Kirkpatrick, provided the intellectual foundation for this policy in her article "Dictatorships and Double Standards," in which she reassured Americans that the country should support authoritarian regimes because they could help stem the tide of international communism. She distinguished between authoritarian regimes and the real threat to freedom, totalitarian states such as the Soviet Union and Cuba.⁴²

That distinction did not sit well with some members of Congress, and, after constant confrontation over human rights during the first year of his presidency, Reagan repackaged his Central America policy as democracy promotion. Democracy promotion did not directly address human rights violations, nor did improving human rights conditions equate to democratic reform. However, the Reagan administration pursued democracy and anti-communism as a way of improving human rights conditions.⁴³ The focus on democracy promotion also revealed the narrow construction of human rights by neocons and the Reagan administration following the Democratic Human Rights discourse. They considered only political

⁴⁰ Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism*, 142–43.

⁴¹ Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America, 1976-1993*, Second Edition (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 54.

⁴² Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships & Double Standards," *World Affairs* 170, no. 2, Jeane J. Kirkpatrick Reprint Issue (Fall 2007): 61–73.

⁴³ Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*, 155.

and civil rights as human rights, a break from international interpretations as articulated by the United Nations and the UDHR.

Members of Congress took notice of the narrow interpretation and looked to the administration to explain. Testifying before the House Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations, Elliott Abrams, then the assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, explained that deemphasizing economic and social rights reflected the administration's hierarchy of rights prioritizing what it considered "the vital core of human rights." Attempting to resolve issues associated with economic or social rights spread resources too thin. Abrams then circled back to object to characterizing economic or social rights as human rights. "We must separate those goods, those goals that the Government ought to encourage over the long term from the rights the Government has absolute duty to respect at any time."⁴⁴ Abrams, illustrating well the hierarchy of rights contained in the Democratic Human Rights discourse, argued that the United States should "not blur the distinction between the two categories. The rights that no government can violate should not be watered down to the status of rights that governments just do their best to secure."⁴⁵ Countries can choose the political or economic system right for them, but, according to Abrams, they must do so through free elections to allow people the opportunity to make the choice.⁴⁶ Defending

⁴⁴ United States Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Review of State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1981: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 1982, 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

democracy and preventing a nation from falling under the influence of communism protected citizens' right to make that choice and protected human rights.⁴⁷

The Nicaraguan Revolution tested the administration's commitment to democracy promotion and its ability to package human rights as a more limited bundle of rights than previously conceived in the United States, at the UN, and in Nicaragua. Reagan faced consistent opposition to this interpretation and his foreign policy objectives with respect to Nicaragua. Human rights activists and progressive NGOs rejected Reagan's strategy of pursuing democracy by supporting authoritarian regimes and, in the case of Nicaragua, Reagan's strategy of supporting paramilitary forces intent on overthrowing the Nicaraguan government. Nicaragua was a unique case for the administration. Rather than engaging in quiet diplomacy to encourage a government to change behavior, the United States openly supported, encouraged, funded, armed, and trained the Nicaraguan Contras.

Human rights advocates held the Reagan administration as an essential party and co-offender to the ongoing human rights abuse by the Contras. Contra opponents argued that, without the president providing financial and military assistance and political support, the Contras would not pose near the danger they did. Congress proved fertile ground for the human rights-based arguments of anti-Contra activists, but, absent compelling reasons to deviate, members of Congress still subscribed to Cold War geopolitics and remained reluctant to appear conciliatory toward communists. NGOs offered the human rights violations of the Contras, the conduct of the CIA in Nicaragua, the Latin American-driven peace process, and the Iran-

⁴⁷ Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism*, 159.

Contra Affair as the compelling reasons for deviation and did so to frame the administration's Contra policy as a human rights violation.

This study focuses on the contribution of NGOs to the human rights discourse as it related to Nicaragua in the 1980s. It examines how NGOs defined human rights and how effective those NGOs were at operationalizing human rights as a language of advocacy against President Reagan's policy of supporting the Contras in a guerrilla war against the Sandinista government. The source material is largely drawn from archives of several of the most prominent NGOs in the United States with respect to human rights and the Contra War, such as AI, the Nicaragua Network, CFNFP, AW, and WOLA. These organizations were representative and at times guided the larger anti-Contra human rights movement in the United States. The research also closely analyzes the human rights language used by pro-Contra organizations, members of Congress, the president, his advisors, and cabinet, and the public diplomacy materials the administration produced. Speeches, announcements, and declarations of Nicaraguan officials and opposition leaders further shed light on the transnational human rights dialogue used to sway public opinion. The study's analysis covers the Sandinistas' rise to power in the late 1970s and concludes in 1988 with the signing of the peace agreement between the Sandinistas and the Contras in Sapoá. With the signing of the Sapoá Accord, the war ended, and U.S.-Nicaragua relations entered a new phase involving a new president and U.S. relations

with anti-Sandinista political parties and the government of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro after the 1990 election.

The research makes several contributions to the study of human rights, U.S.-Nicaragua relations, and the ways in which domestic politics and political activism influenced U.S. foreign policy. This study illuminates human rights as a contested political and legal construction in international affairs. The Reagan administration, members of Congress, NGOs, and the Nicaraguan government each advocated for their own interpretation and hierarchy of rights. By identifying the extent to which NGOs and the Reagan administration followed and/or influenced international human rights trends, this dissertation establishes the Contra War debate as a significant episode for understanding the development of human rights both in the United States and internationally. The dissertation also tells a new story of U.S.-Nicaragua relations in the 1980s by considering the perspective of NGOs in the United States and the transnational network in which they operated to stop the Contra War. Furthermore, it reframes the Contra War within a human rights discourse to help make sense of a complicated course of events and the political rhetoric surrounding those events. This study also sheds light on an episode in U.S. history in which organizations and individual activists played important roles in international politics and, at times, restrained the power of the president with grassroots organizing and a morally compelling argument. The strategies and methods of NGOs changed over time as organizations adapted to obstacles of challenging a popular president and trying to roll back long-established principles of Cold War politics.

Perception guided the human rights debate over Nicaragua policy. This study reflects on how Americans and Nicaraguans perceived human rights, how advocates for or against the Contras shaped those perceptions, and how perceptions of human rights influenced U.S. relations with Nicaragua. Scholars are examining the origins of human rights, their development in law and politics, and the meaning of human rights as developed within that intellectual history.⁴⁸ This dissertation adds a new dimension by analyzing popular, rather than the academic or legal, applications of human rights. The debate over human rights in American politics did not take place in a courtroom or a law school seminar but, rather, in newspapers through op-ed pieces, in the offices of Congressional staff through activist lobbying delegations, and on streets throughout the United States through mass demonstrations. By 1979, the year the Sandinistas took power, Americans and Nicaraguans accepted the presence of human rights in international law and politics and understood the influence human rights advocacy could have on international relations.

The contestation over what constituted human rights underpinned the larger political divide between Washington and Managua and revealed the weakness of international law in the twentieth century, a pressure point in international relations

⁴⁸ Richard A. Falk, "Ideological Pattern in the United States Human Rights Debate: 1945-1978," in *The Dynamics of Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. Natalie Hevener Kaufman (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1981); Kenneth Cmiel, "The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (December 1999): 1231-50; Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*; Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010); Samuel Moyn, "Imperialism, Self-Determination, and the Rise of Human Rights," in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 159-78; Ned Richardson-Little, "Dictatorship and Dissent: Human Rights in East Germany in the 1970s," in *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s*, ed. Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 49-67.

that this dissertation explores in detail. International law existed only with the consent and participation of sovereign governments, and scholars are producing a wide array of work investigating how governments interpreted international law in ways that supported various interests. Studies find that international law legitimized empire-building and global inequality, encouraged peace yet led to war, and extended the power of nations into the sovereign territory of others.⁴⁹ Without an institution with legal supremacy over nations, no body of law or legal system controlled international behavior and relations, so international law came to serve those with the power to dictate its meaning and establish community standards. The post-World War II institutions democratized international law somewhat and led to agreements and covenants that defined human rights, but only for those countries that signed off on the agreements. Even then, interpreting the terms of the agreements regarding human rights remained open to the eye of the beholder, and the international community interpreted human rights in a variety of ways. The amorphous human rights legal structure proved self-defeating in the case of Nicaragua. The Sandinistas, the Contras, and the Reagan administration all claimed to act in the interest of human rights. No international organization had the authority or ability to act against the interest of the Contra War participants.

⁴⁹ Francis Anthony Boyle, *Foundations of World Order: The Legalist Approach to International Relations, 1898–1922* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press Books, 1999); Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law, 1870-1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Jonathan Zasloff, “Law and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy: From the Gilded Age to the New Era,” *New York Law Review* 78 (April 2003): 239–373; Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law*; Daniel S. Margolies, *Spaces of Law in American Foreign Relations: Extradition and Extraterritoriality in the Borderlands and Beyond, 1877-1898* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2011).

In the post-World War II era, Cold War politics and decolonization came to influence further development of international law, particularly as it related to human rights. Akira Iriye and Petra Goedde find that anti-communists in the United States accused the Soviets of human right violations for repression of free speech, free exercise in religion, and other political and civil freedoms, whereas the Soviets called the economic exploitation of the U.S. worker an ongoing human rights violation.⁵⁰ Ned Richardson-Little finds the Socialist Party in East Germany claimed that the government served human rights and that socialism represented self-determination of the East German people while Western liberal capitalism engaged in oppression of the individual and global imperialism.⁵¹ In nations emerging from decades, if not centuries, of colonial rule and exploitation, people understood human rights as referring to the basic economic and social rights of available housing, food, education, and medical care, in addition to the right to self-determination.⁵²

The uncertainty of what constituted a human right has also occupied historians as they seek to unpack the term in various political and cultural contexts, a task on which this study focuses. Brad Simpson concludes that “there was no single ‘human rights movement’ with clear goals or agreement on what constituted a core human right.” Simpson considers discourses of human rights as forums of constant negotiation and contestation in which rights of self-determination often lost out to the West’s conceptions of human rights as individual liberty and free enterprise. “If

⁵⁰ Akira Iriye and Petro Goedde, “Introduction: Human Rights as History,” in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History*, ed. Akira Iriye, Petro Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

⁵¹ Richardson-Little, “Dictatorship and Dissent,” 50–55.

⁵² Iriye and Goedde, “Introduction,” 8.

human rights advocates during the 1970s focused on crimes against the individual and the body, many postcolonial states and more politically radical solidarity campaigns continued to frame human rights demands in an anticolonial context.” In that regard, Simpson finds that self-determination as a human right resonated with many newly independent and developing nations.⁵³ This dissertation builds on Simpson’s framework of discourse to identify two distinct discourses, the Democratic Human Rights discourse and the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse, that framed the debate over Nicaragua policy. In doing so, this study shows the influence that the distinctions in human rights had on international affairs.

While historians reveal how human rights advocacy wielded greater influence on U.S. foreign policy in the 1970s, especially during the Carter administration, this study demonstrates that the case of Nicaragua pushed human rights to the foreground of Reagan’s policy debate. Scholars such as Robert Pastor and Kenton Clymer address the significance of human rights for Carter, although both express skepticism about whether Carter fully deserved the admiration of contemporary political commentators and historians. They find Carter’s human rights policy inconsistent and the execution ineffective.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Carter did make an attempt to embrace the human rights movement and spoke about the importance of economic and social rights that gained a greater following among progressives in the 1970s. Michael Stohl and David Carleton examine Reagan’s approach to human rights. They identify

⁵³ Brad Simpson, “‘The First Right’: The Carter Administration, Indonesia, and the Transnational Human Rights Politics of the 1970s,” in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 180, 187-88.

⁵⁴ Robert Pastor, “The Carter Administration and Latin America: A Test of Principle,” in *United States Policy in Latin America: A Quarter Century of Crisis and Challenge, 1961-1986*, ed. John D. Martz (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 61–97; Kenton Clymer, “Jimmy Carter, Human Rights, and Cambodia,” *Diplomatic History* 27, no. 2 (April 2003): 245–78.

international terrorism as a primary human rights concern for the Reagan administration.⁵⁵ This dissertation seeks to provide more nuance and detail to human rights policy and underlying principles for the Reagan administration through the case study of Nicaragua. Reagan's human rights position had more to do with democracy promotion, anti-communism, and power projection than it did just with terrorism.

The role of Congress in foreign relations and human rights policy is an important and growing topic of the historiography, and this dissertation builds upon that scholarship by taking a closer look at the relationship between the legislative and executive branch. Kathryn Sikkink argues that the shift in U.S. foreign policy to incorporate human rights in the 1970s came from changing ideas regarding human rights after experiences in détente, Vietnam, and the Civil Rights era. Members of Congress and administration officials institutionalized those new ideas in federal law and Congressional oversight.⁵⁶ Barbara Keys finds that members of Congress first acted on human rights after allegations of torture by the Greek junta in the 1960s and 1970s. The Greek episode coincided with a general sense of responsibility for the Vietnam War experience and an increasing public awareness in the United States of the Holocaust and the silence of the German people in the midst of the tragedy.⁵⁷ Members of Congress who came together on the Greek issue laid the foundation for

⁵⁵ David Carleton and Michael Stohl, "The Foreign Policy of Human Rights: Rhetoric and Reality from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan," *Human Rights Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (May 1985): 205-08.

⁵⁶ Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*, 18-19.

⁵⁷ Barbara Keys, "Anti-Torture Politics: Amnesty International, the Greek Junta, and the Origins of the Human Rights 'Boom' in the United States," in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History*, ed. Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 202-3.

future work on human rights issues and legislation in the 1970s.⁵⁸ David P. Forsythe agrees with the importance of Congress in U.S. human rights history, contending that Congress, not Carter, made human rights a prominent issue in the 1970s.

Furthermore, Congress forced Reagan to consider human rights in foreign policy.⁵⁹

This dissertation expands on the work of Congress and human rights and examines how human rights perpetuated a contentious relationship between the two branches of government in the 1980s through the case study of the Contra War.

This dissertation also adds to the work of scholars are exploring how the lexicon of human rights served as an important tool in a variety of ways and contexts for activists. William Patrick Kelly's work addresses activism in the 1970s and finds that activists started using the language of human rights as a "depoliticized framework," emphasizing morality over politics, to conceptualize and attack the state-sponsored violence in Latin America. Although human rights were not unknown, Kelly argues that activists did not make wide use of the language of human rights until the 1970s. However, the problem of interpretation remained open. Ironically, relying on human rights as a vocabulary for advocating change actually reduced the degree of change sought. Human rights advocacy that focused on ending violence and torture sacrificed radical social revolution that activists often sought, particularly in Latin America.⁶⁰ Carl Bon Tempo emphasizes the differences in interpretation of human rights among NGOs to refute the teleological narrative of a

⁵⁸ Ibid., 212–14.

⁵⁹ David P. Forsythe, "Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect," *Political Science Quarterly* 105, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): ix.

⁶⁰ William Patrick Kelly, "'Magic Words': The Advent of Transnational Human Rights Activism in Latin America's Southern Cone in the Long 1970s," in *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s*, ed. Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 89–90.

unified human rights movement. NGOs did not all work together toward a common cause. Groups such as Freedom House subscribed to the Democratic Human Rights discourse while the more progressive NGOs followed the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse.⁶¹ Kenneth Cmiel focuses on Amnesty International's work exposing human rights violations through global information networks and the strategies it used to raise money and to collect and distribute information. Cmiel finds NGOs essential subjects for human rights study because of the work they did investigating and advocating for human rights and supporting the work of Congress before Carter ever reached the White House. Groups of the 1970s may have acknowledged the importance of economic and social rights, but, Cmiel concludes, they generally advocated for civil rights.⁶²

This study also adds to the historiography of NGOs advocating for human rights for Latin America by probing deeper into the Nicaraguan case that has largely been left out of the historiography while other Latin American nations are the subject of excellent analysis. James N. Green covers Brazil, showing that the work of the human rights activists opposing U.S. support for the Brazilian dictatorship successfully changed U.S. policy.⁶³ Green argues that the Brazilian activists created the model for human rights activism and transnational networking that others followed in the 1970s and 1980s.⁶⁴ Kelly works on Christian groups advocating for

⁶¹ Carl J. Bon Tempo, "From the Center-Right: Freedom House and Human Rights in the 1970s and 1980s," in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History*, ed. Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 224.

⁶² Cmiel, "The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States," 1233-34.

⁶³ Green, *We Cannot Remain Silent*, 18.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

human rights and Christian responsibility in Chile and Brazil in the 1970s.⁶⁵ Vanessa Walker's dissertation covers Chile and Argentina in the 1970s, examining the role non-government actors played as mediators between government and the public in forming and implementing policy. She argues that in the complexity of international diplomacy and domestic politics, human rights took on greater objectives within the larger picture of U.S. foreign policy and it contributed to a diplomatic lexicon for framing the purpose of United States.⁶⁶

The scholarship leaves out Nicaragua because Nicaragua did not fit the pattern of state-sponsored violence. The direct political attacks on Nicaragua by the Reagan administration for human rights violations ran counter to general U.S. policy in relations with Latin America of quiet diplomacy and reluctance to denounce the conduct of other governments. However, Nicaragua is essential for studying the history of human rights precisely because the state did not engage in widespread

⁶⁵ William Patrick Kelly, "Human Rights and Christian Responsibility: Transnational Christian Activism, Human Rights, and State Violence in Brazil and Chile in the 1970s," in *Religious Responses to Violence: Human Rights in Latin America Past and Present*, ed. Alexander Wilde (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 96–97.

⁶⁶ Vanessa Walker, "Ambivalent Allies: Advocates, Diplomats, and the Struggle for an 'American' Human Rights Policy" (The University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2011), 4–5, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/docview/929146111/abstract/D658BEA0D11E41A1PQ/1>. Other excellent scholarship in Latin America and human rights includes: Chile - John Dinges, *The Condor Years: How Pinochet And His Allies Brought Terrorism To Three Continents* (New York: The New Press, 2004); Vanessa Walker, "At the End of Influence: The Letelier Assassination, Human Rights, and Rethinking Intervention in US-Latin American Relations," *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 1 (2011): 109–35; Kristin Sorensen, *Media, Memory, and Human Rights in Chile*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Guatemala - Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*; Argentina - Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere*; Thomas C. Wright, *State Terrorism in Latin America: Chile, Argentina, and International Human Rights*, Latin American Silhouettes (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); Thomas C. Wright, *Impunity, Human Rights, and Democracy: Chile and Argentina, 1990-2005* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); Mexico – Ariana Quezada, "The Revolution in Crisis: A History of Human Rights in Mexico, 1970-1980" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 2016); Dominican Republic - Abraham Lowenthal, *The Dominican Intervention*, 2d ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); regional survey – Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy Toward Latin America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

violations—though it certainly did violate some rights. The complexity of the human rights issues was greater in Nicaragua, and policy makers and activists thus struggled with that complexity more mightily. Neither the Contras nor the Sandinistas presented good options for Nicaragua in terms of human rights, but both sides of the debate asserted principled stands based on their respective perception of conditions and politics in Nicaragua as interpreted through one of human rights discourses. Nicaragua presents a unique case study in which a theoretical debate manifested into policy debate involving hard choices affecting millions of lives.

This dissertation also widens the field of players in the debate over Nicaragua policy in the 1980s to include NGOs as critically important. Historians have not yet considered NGOs to the extent contained in this research, nor have historians adequately analyzed NGOs in the context of the human rights debate over Nicaragua. Van Gosse examines the influence of the Nicaragua solidarity movement without addressing the human rights component of organizations' advocacy.⁶⁷ Christian Smith examines activism of the anti-Contra movement using statistical analysis to profile the demographics of NGOs Sanctuary, Witness for Peace, and the Pledge of Resistance. Like Gosse, Smith does not examine human rights in the context of the Contra War other than to mention human rights.⁶⁸ Hector Perla studies Nicaragua solidarity organizations and the role Nicaraguan exiles played in the development and inspiration of the solidarity movement in the United States. Like Goss and Smith, Perla does not address human rights as a component of activism. Perla also

⁶⁷ Van Gosse, "Active Engagement: The Legacy of Central American Solidarity," *NACLA: Report on the Americas* XXVIII, no. 5 (April 1995): 22–29, 42.

⁶⁸ Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central American Peace Movement* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

argues that the Sandinistas played a role in starting the anti-war movement as a strategy for opposing Reagan from inside the United States. His analysis of Central American agency through solidarity contests a North American-centric focus on activism and corrects the impression that clever Sandinista operatives manipulated U.S. activists. He also demonstrates that this translational network of NGOs on behalf of Nicaragua represented a method for relatively weak actors to withstand and resist overwhelmingly more powerful actors, in this case the United States.⁶⁹

Bradford Martin does investigate the activity of NGOs based in the United States, specifically Witness for Peace, but Martin only mentions the human rights issues involved in the operations of Witness for Peace without substantive discussion of human rights advocacy or the role of human rights in policy formation.⁷⁰

Roger Peace offers a more focused study of the anti-Contra War campaign of NGOs, going into far greater depth than other scholars who make only passing mentions. Peace concedes that the anti-Contra War campaign failed to stop the war, but he contends that the effort did strengthen the resolve of the public and Congress against Reagan's policies, which limited the administration's options.⁷¹ Peace also examines the politics at issue, the framing of the debate, the organizational structure of anti-war groups, their strategies, and the transnational nature of the anti-war campaign.⁷²

⁶⁹ Hector Perla, "Si Nicaragua Venció, El Salvador Vencerá, El Salvador Vencera: Central American Agency in the Creation of the U.S.-Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement," *Latin American Research Review* 43, no. 2 (2008): 147-56. Perla only uses Goss or Smith to discuss the solidarity movement or organizations involved. No primary research is involved.

⁷⁰ Bradford Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011), 27.

⁷¹ Roger Peace, *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 246.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 5.

Peace concludes that, among the various arguments made by activists, claiming the Contras committed terrorism in Nicaragua worked best but only into 1985.⁷³ The portrayal of the Contras as terrorists drifts close to an analysis of human rights arguments, but terrorism and human rights were related but discrete concepts. Furthermore, analysis of allegations of terrorism as a rhetorical tool for the anti-Contra movement only scratches the surface of a more complete answer for why calling the Contras terrorists at times succeeded in influencing Congress and at other times failed. Peace eschews a treatment of human rights to focus instead on the organizational structure and functioning of the NGOs. The human rights analysis of this dissertation provides context and substance to explain the anti-Contra movement. This dissertation also helps explain the message underpinning the human rights advocacy that Peace addresses in general terms. Furthermore, while Peace focuses his book on the work of NGOs, he makes no use of NGO archives or publications. Those archives make up a central component of the research for this project that reveal the inner strategy for deploying a human rights discourse and the methods NGOs used to construct an anti-Contra movement.

Similar to Peace, David Bassano demonstrates the significance of NGOs in U.S.-Nicaragua relations and U.S. domestic politics and touches on the importance of human rights advocacy. Bassano does not conceptualize the Sandinista revolution and the Contra War in terms of human rights, which this study does do, but focuses instead on the refugee and immigration assistance programs of Amnesty International USA, the National Lawyers Guild, and the Committee in Solidarity

⁷³ Ibid., 37–43.

with the People of El Salvador.⁷⁴ He argues that the refugee protection provided by NGOs succeeded in reducing the scale and effect of human rights abuses on the people of Central America.⁷⁵

This dissertation argues that NGOs used human rights advocacy effectively to limit U.S. support of the Contras and help bring the Contra War to an end. The research is organized chronologically into five chapters. The first chapter examines how conflicting interpretations of human rights influenced U.S.-Nicaragua relations after the revolution and contributed to escalating tension between the two governments. The second chapter identifies early efforts by NGOs to articulate human rights-based opposition to the Reagan's administration's Contra program while Nicaraguan officials also accused the United States of violating Nicaraguan human rights by supporting the Contras. Human rights made for a compelling case as the Reagan administration founds its policy of supporting the Contras in danger through 1983. Chapter three continues to show the success NGOs achieved using human rights to reframe the Contra War away from the Cold War interpretation of international affairs. NGOs and their allies in Congress rallied enough votes to defeat Contra funding in 1984. However, the events of chapter four demonstrated the strength of the Democratic Human Rights discourse and Cold War politics in Washington. NGOs and Contra opponents suffered setbacks when the administration turned human rights around to its benefit and won approval of \$100 million for the Contras in 1986. Chapter five explains how NGOs organized nationwide grassroots

⁷⁴ David Bassano, "Two Roads to Safety: The Central American Human Rights Movement in the United States" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University at Albany, State University of New York, 2012), 7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

campaigns against the Contra War while taking advantage of new enthusiasm in the movement and growing opposition to Reagan's Contra policy. NGOs helped reshape how Americans saw Nicaragua as a human rights crisis outside the Cold War political construct and, by doing so, helped end funding for Contra military operations. With the funding cut off, the Contras agreed to a cease fire and peace agreement with the Sandinistas in 1988, paving the way for the presidential election in 1990.

CHAPTER 1 – RISE OF THE SANDINISTAS: HUMAN RIGHTS IN REVOLUTION AND COUNTERREVOLUTION IN NICARAGUA, 1978-1982

Human rights provided a framework for understanding the Nicaraguan Revolution and a lexicon for political advocacy over U.S.-Nicaragua relations during and after the revolution. Contradictory views of the two governments over human rights influenced relations between the United States and Nicaragua after the Sandinistas took power in 1979. The legal and political differences contributed to nearly a decade of war in Nicaragua. In Washington, officials saw the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan revolution through a Cold War prism, identifying the Sandinistas as a leftist movement, controlled by either the Cubans or the Soviets, or both, and building a totalitarian state through repression and violence. A Soviet ally on the mainland of the Americas threatened regional and national security, and, therefore, threatened democracy and freedom in the Western Hemisphere. President Ronald Reagan and his administration formed policy and spoke about the Nicaraguan government in these geopolitical terms that implied principles consistent with the Democratic Human Rights discourse. However, the president declined to address human rights explicitly as a component of U.S. foreign policy early in his administration. In contrast, the Sandinistas promoted the revolution in Anticolonial Human Rights terms, proclaiming a popular uprising against a dictator and puppet of Washington. The revolution served as a rebuke to the United States and its long history of intervention in Nicaragua.

In addition, NGOs operating within the United States interpreted human rights consistent with the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse while criticizing both governments' records. Human rights advocacy opposing Reagan's Contra War questioned how the narrow focus on anti-communism that underpinned the Democratic Human Rights discourse could really serve human rights. In doing so, NGOs pushed the Reagan administration into an open debate over its Nicaragua policy in human rights terms. These organizations used different tactics, and they focused on different aspects of human rights in Nicaragua. Each organization also had its own constituency and, consequently, its own specific objectives while all worked toward the same goal of stopping U.S. support for the counterrevolution in Nicaragua. Human rights served as the common vehicle of advocacy, which often led NGOs to work together. The Reagan administration would not fully deploy human rights as a strategy until forced to do so in the face of significant resistance to its policies.

1. Revolution for Human Rights

The Sandinistas defined human rights based on their experiences living under and resisting the U.S.-backed Somoza regime. They believed that Washington had trampled on Nicaraguan self-determination and sovereignty in the early twentieth century beginning with a nearly twenty-year military occupation followed by a brutal authoritarian dynasty that ruled Nicaragua until 1979 with the assistance of the United States. At the time, Nicaragua served as a strong U.S. ally in the Cold War and a bulwark against leftist movements in Central America. Though the United

States did not come to the rescue of its ally as Nicaragua succumbed to revolution, President Jimmy Carter still tried to guide the transition of power away from the Sandinistas toward a more pro-U.S. bloc of moderates. Washington failed to fully appreciate the popular appeal the Sandinistas enjoyed. Nor did Washington understand the importance of human rights to those forming the new Nicaraguan state and how Nicaraguans defined human rights in reaction to a history of U.S. political, economic, and cultural domination.

The United States invaded Nicaragua in 1912 to protect U.S. citizens and property seemingly in danger during a civil war, and the U.S. military then attempted to bring stability to Nicaragua through a new political order. Much of the population opposed the foreign occupying force and rebelled against the violation of Nicaraguan sovereignty and the foreign interference in domestic politics, most notably in the rebellion led by Augusto César Sandino, from whom the Sandinistas took their name.¹ U.S. forces occupied the country until 1933 when Franklin Roosevelt withdrew all remaining troops but left behind a U.S.-trained security force called the National Guard. The National Guard would dominate Nicaraguan society and politics for over four decades.² Anastasio Somoza García used his control over the National Guard to win the presidency in 1936 and established authoritarian rule over the country, whether through his own direct rule or through puppet governments, until his assassination in 1956. His sons, Luis Somoza Debayle and Anastasio Somoza Debayle, continued the family's hold on power, in large part by cultivating a

¹ Alan McPherson, *The Invaded: How Latin Americans and Their Allies Fought and Ended U.S. Occupations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua under U.S. Imperial Rule* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 3–9.

close relationship with the United States as its ally in the Cold War. The relationship with the Somoza regime served Washington's interests by maintaining U.S. influence over the Nicaraguan government while Somoza received economic aid and other development assistance.³

A devastating earthquake struck Managua in 1972, killing approximately ten thousand people and exposing the Somoza regime's corruption. Then-president Anastasio Somoza Debayle failed to provide the humanitarian aid people needed or to provide the assistance necessary for rebuilding even the capital city of Managua. Instead, Somoza supported his military's looting and personal gain. He and his allies awarded themselves government contracts so that they received the windfall from international aid.⁴ The outrage among Nicaraguans following the earthquake began Somoza's fall from power and the rise of the Sandinistas.

Somoza's blatant disregard for the suffering of his people led to widespread unrest, and, by 1973, a rising number of Nicaraguans, including elites and business owners, started supporting the Sandinista insurgency. The Sandinistas, along with other anti-Somoza groups, gained more support as the National Guard pillaged and destroyed villages to root out insurgents.⁵ Adding to the unrest, popular newspaper publisher and Somoza critic Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal was murdered in January 1978. Chamorro's murder fueled even more anger toward the government

³ Thomas W. Walker, "Introduction," in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 1–22.

⁴ Thomas W. Walker and Christine J. Wade, *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle*, Fifth Edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2011), 31–33.

⁵ Walker and Wade, 31–33.

and sparked massive anti-Somoza demonstrations and strikes throughout the country, which produced even more support for the Sandinistas.⁶

The Sandinistas formed in Cuba and Nicaragua in 1961 to resist the oppression and corruption of the Somoza regime and the influence from the United States. Prior to the 1972 earthquake, the Sandinistas remained small, with little influence in national politics. Somoza's National Guard consistently defeated the FSLN in confrontations throughout the 1960s.⁷ The resistance movement found new life and gained broader appeal in the mid-1970s in large part because of economic hardship among the rural and working-class populations and the repression by Somoza.⁸ The Sandinistas promised better working conditions in mines, farms, schools, and elsewhere, the right to form unions, the reduction of crime and corruption stunting economic growth, greater access to improved housing, and an end to torture and murder committed by the state.⁹ The Sandinistas also framed their insurrection as a struggle against imperialism and the oppressive influence, political and economic, of the United States.¹⁰ As the Sandinista movement engaged in sustained attacks on National Guard posts in September 1978, they earned the esteem

⁶ Lawrence A. Pezzullo, Oral History: Interview with Lawrence A. Pezzullo, interview by Arthur Day, February 24, 1989, 11, Digital National Security Archive; Karen De Young, "Sandinistas' Long Struggle for Victory; Sandinistas Often Altered Strategy to Gain Support; Nicaraguan Rebels Often Revised Strategy to Win Broad Support," *The Washington Post*, June 24, 1979, LexisNexis Academic; Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 168–69.

⁷ Walker, "Introduction," 3; Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, 169.

⁸ Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, 169.

⁹ "Programa Mínimo Del F.S.L.N." June 6, 1978, Vertical File, Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica.

¹⁰ Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, "Comunicados de La Dirección Nacional Del Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional" October 3, 1978, Vertical File, Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica.

of those angered by the government. The insurgents posed no real threat to government forces then, but the movement gained thousands of new recruits.¹¹

The FSLN, working with other anti-Somoza groups, formed a diverse coalition and launched a major offensive on May 29, 1979, which Sandinista leadership confidently, and accurately, announced as the “final offensive.”¹² In addition to the fighting, businesses throughout Nicaragua supported the FSLN by closing their stores as part of a general strike that approached 100 percent participation in some cities. With widespread popular support and coordination among different factions, the rebels controlled León, Nicaragua’s second largest city, a week into the offensive, and by June 10, 1979, the guerrillas fought the National Guard neighborhood to neighborhood in the capital city of Managua.¹³ Somoza remained defiant in power as the Sandinistas sensed that victory was close and called for all Nicaraguans to join in the battle against their oppressor.¹⁴

President Carter did not initially give the civil unrest in Nicaragua much attention until human rights violations by Somoza forced his hand. He and his State Department focused more on negotiating terms for the transfer of the Panama Canal to Panama, addressing the challenges of a Middle East peace agreement, and working with the Soviets on an arms reduction treaty. Also, the Carter administration

¹¹ De Young, “Sandinistas’ Long Struggle for Victory.”

¹² Karen De Young, “Nicaragua Says 300 Irregulars Attack From Costa Rica,” *The Washington Post*, May 30, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; Karen DeYoung, “Nicaraguan Rebels Pin Hopes on Masses in ‘Final Offensive,’” *The Washington Post*, June 2, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹³ David F. Belnap, “Nicaraguan Rebels Control City of Leon: Guerrillas Dig In as Armored Column Advances; General Strike Continues,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 1979; Karen DeYoung, “Sandinistas Battle in Nicaragua Capital; Jets Strafe Guerrilla Positions,” *The Washington Post*, June 10, 1979, LexisNexis Academic.

¹⁴ “Viva La Huelga General Revolucionaria, La Direccion Nacional Conjunta Del FSLN” June 1979, Vertical File, Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica.

did not think the Sandinistas presented a threat to the Somoza government. Reports in 1977 of atrocities by the Somoza regime and then the Chamorro assassination caused the White House to turn its attention to Nicaragua. Administration officials tried to convince Somoza to change his tactics and stop the repression and violence, threatening to cut off financial and military aid, but those threats received strong pushback from Somoza's allies in Congress.¹⁵ As officials in Washington debated, human rights groups called for intervention against Somoza or at least a recognition of human rights abuses. NGOs criticized the United States government for failing to do anything. AI documented hundreds of cases of torture, disappearances, and summary executions and publicized its findings widely.¹⁶

The administration initially approached the crisis with the intent not to resolve human rights issues but instead to maintain the friendly Somoza government in power. However, officials quickly determined that only a military intervention could save Somoza, an option that administration officials and critics rejected. The Sandinistas' "final offensive," the second major uprising since September 1978, convinced the White House to find a way to guide the transition of power to moderates within the anti-Somoza coalition.¹⁷ After much negotiation, Somoza resigned on July 17, 1979, leaving Francisco Urcuyo Maleanos, president of the

¹⁵ Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled*, 169–70.

¹⁶ "Human Rights Violations in the Republic of Nicaragua" (London: Amnesty International, July 18, 1979), Amnesty International of the USA, Inc.: National Office Records, Box II.5 5, AMR 43 Americas - Nicaragua 1979, 1983, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library; Legal Office to All National Sections et al., "AI Submission to the UN on Human Rights Violations in Nicaragua," Memorandum, July 24, 1979, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc.: National Office Records, Box II.5 5, AMR 43 Americas - Nicaragua 1979, 1983, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

¹⁷ John M. Goshkor, "More Pressure to Oust Somoza Weighed: U.S. Fears Nicaragua Civil War Will Lead to Takeover by Radical Guerrillas," *The Washington Post*, June 13, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

lower house of the Nicaraguan legislature, to lead the government.¹⁸ Despite efforts of the Carter administration to influence the transition away from the Sandinistas, they officially took over the government on July 19, ending a revolution that had killed approximately fifty thousand Nicaraguans.¹⁹

As early as June 1979, the Sandinistas started working with other opposition forces to plan a new direction for Nicaragua, rejecting repression and claiming to usher in an era of democracy and social and economic equality. As they anticipated Somoza's demise, the FSLN announced the formation of a provisional government, called the Junta of the Government of National Reconstruction. The Junta consisted of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, widow of Pedro Chamorro, Dr. Sergio Ramirez Mercado, Alfonso Robelo Callejas, Moises Hassan, and Daniel Ortega. Ramirez and Ortega came from the FSLN, and the others came from private sector factions within the anti-Somoza coalition.²⁰ The Junta served as the top executive authority of the provisional government. Also, the Council of State would serve as the temporary national legislature made up of thirty-five members elected from the various political and social organizations. The Supreme Court of Justice would be the judicial branch of the government-in-waiting.²¹

¹⁸ Karen De Young, "Somoza Agrees to Quit, Leaves Timing to U.S.; Somoza Agrees to Resign but Leaves Timing to U.S.," *The Washington Post*, July 7, 1979, LexisNexis Academic; Karen De Young, "Somoza Resigns, Successor Names; Somoza Aides Reportedly Ready to Flee," *The Washington Post*, July 17, 1979, LexisNexis Academic.

¹⁹ Karen De Young, "Sandinistas Enter Managua, Ending Civil War; Nicaraguan Guerrillas End Civil War by Taking Managua," *The Washington Post*, July 20, 1979, LexisNexis Academic; Peace, *A Call to Conscience*, 12.

²⁰ Tomás Borge et al., "Proclamation" (Nicaragua, June 16, 1979), Nicaragua Network Records, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²¹ "Platform of the Government of National Reconstruction," June 28, 1979, 1–2, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Once formed, the Junta announced that it planned for a national project of reconstruction focused on rebuilding the economy and creating a democracy appropriate for Nicaragua based on those principles emphasized during the revolution, including self-determination, political and civil rights for all Nicaraguans, and cultural, social, and economic rights.²² In its Platform, the Junta declared that it would create a democracy that guaranteed the rights of every citizen of Nicaragua, ensured full political participation and universal suffrage, sought equality in social and economic opportunity, and protected the right to freedom of expression, worship, and association.²³ The Junta promised the new government would address the country's "gravest national problems: hunger, unemployment, malnutrition, illiteracy, housing – all of which are the legacy of 50 years of Somocismo."²⁴ The Sandinistas intended on building a government and society responsive to the basic needs of the people, extending the protections of government beyond the right to vote or the right of free expression. The Sandinistas also used these social programs as tools to build the new Nicaraguan state and consolidate national power.

The Junta took specific steps to reassure Nicaraguans and the world that the new government would uphold human rights as understood and defined by the UN and the Organization of American States (OAS). The Platform included a declaration to end laws that violated the dignity of the person, including "murder, disappearances, torture and illegal detentions, and home searches." The Junta

²² Daniel Ortega et al., "Programatic Bases of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation for Democracy and the Reconstruction of Nicaragua" (Nicaragua, April 1979), 2, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²³ "Platform of the Government of National Reconstruction," 1–2.

²⁴ Violeta de Chamorro et al., "First Proclamation of the Government for National Reconstruction" (Nicaragua, June 18, 1979), Nicaragua Network Records, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society.

affirmed a policy of nonalignment for Nicaragua while seeking “self-determination, economic justice, and mutually beneficial relations with those nations that respect the revolutionary process in Nicaragua.”²⁵ Leadership also promised to hold free elections for local officials and for national office.²⁶ After the fall of Somoza, the Junta ratified the American Convention on Human Rights and the UN’s Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The new government also signed the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International American Charter of Social Guarantees.²⁷

Once in power and faced with governing, revolutionaries in Nicaragua did not maintain the cohesion they enjoyed while fighting to bring down a government, but the various factions did come together over human rights. Unity within the new government and popular support among the anti-Somoza coalition started slipping away when moderates in the FSLN began breaking off from the Marxists in early 1980.²⁸ Problems arose, in large part, from disputes over the appropriate form of democracy for Nicaragua. Frustrated moderates expressed their continued support for the reforms and policies of the Junta, but they sought a quicker transition to democracy through elections. They also wanted a political alternative to the leftists within the Sandinista government.²⁹

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

²⁶ “Junta Vows to Back Rights,” *The Washington Post*, July 18, 1979, LexisNexis Academic.

²⁷ “From Revolution to Repression: Human Rights in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas” (United States Department of State, Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean, March 1986), 7, Digital National Security Archive.

²⁸ Christopher Dickey, “Revolutionary Unity Fades in Nicaragua As Problems Mount,” *The Washington Post*, March 20, 1980, LexisNexis Academic.

²⁹ Charles A. Krause, “Moderates Form Party in Managua,” *The Washington Post*, September 8, 1979, LexisNexis Academic.

In July, the anti-Somoza coalition fully broke apart when the Nicaraguan government seemed to many, including members of the Junta, to be moving too far to the left and away from immediate elections.³⁰ Robelo represented the strongest voice for the private sector in the government. Robelo, one of five members of the governing Junta, first announced in mid-March 1980 the formation of a new party, the Movimiento Democrático Nicaragüense.³¹ He subsequently resigned from the Junta on April 22, a day after the Sandinistas announced a plan to expand the Council of State, a move that would provide a path for the Sandinistas to take a majority of the seats rather than the originally planned one-third.³² Chamorro, another moderate on the Junta, resigned on April 19 supposedly because of health and family reasons. The resignations of Robelo and Chamorro dealt a blow to the credibility of the Sandinista government and indicated growing discord between the more radical Sandinistas in government and the moderates among the private sector.³³

The break among the anti-Somoza coalition did not yet rise to crisis or civil war, as all parties still seemed willing and capable of coexisting and reaching political compromise, if not joining in a government based on a common view of Nicaraguan human rights consistent with the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse. In June 1981, the various factions, including representatives from the Sandinistas, met in a forum in Managua to discuss the future of the Nicaraguan state. Participants

³⁰ Veronica R. Clifford, "The Nicaraguan Resistance ('Contras'): Background and Major Concerns of Congress," Report (Washington, D.C.: United States Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, December 1, 1987), 1, Digital National Security Archive.

³¹ Dickey, "Revolutionary Unity Fades in Nicaragua As Problems Mount."

³² Christopher Dickey, "Sandinistas Act to Keep Business Sector's Favor," *The Washington Post*, April 29, 1980, LexisNexis Academic.

³³ Dickey, "Revolutionary Unity Fades in Nicaragua As Problems Mount."

agreed on various principles upon which they could build the new government, all of which aligned with previous statements from the governing Junta that recognized and defended political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights of the Nicaraguan people. Participants also adopted a position grounded in anti-imperialism and self-determination. As such, the forum concluded that the revolution stood for democracy, pluralism, and anti-imperialism and that those principles must continue in the new government and Nicaraguan society.³⁴

The Sandinistas and the opposition parties agreed that Nicaraguan “[d]emocracy and its exercise must be conceived with realistic criteria, adequate to our socio-economic, political and historical context.” Nicaraguans alone would set the terms of their new government and implement democracy consistent with their needs, culture, and traditions, and pluralism formed a core principle of Nicaragua’s future. Assertions of self-determination and political and economic independence served as a strong rebuke to the decades of U.S. dominance through the Somoza regime and attempts to continue controlling Nicaragua’s destiny. Forum participants also remained focused on economic opportunity as a right to individuals and reforming the structure of society and the economy to enhance that opportunity. They called for a mixed economy with private property and state property while also seeking economic stimulation through efficient national planning.³⁵

The national debate over the future of the Nicaraguan government and the principles upon which the society would be built offered an unprecedented

³⁴ Lawrence A. Pezzullo to Alexander M Haig Jr., “Text of National Forum 19 Points of Agreement,” Telegram, June 29, 1981, 1–2, Accession number: NI01348, Digital National Security Archive.

³⁵ Ibid., 1–2.

opportunity for Nicaraguans to determine their own destiny after decades of repression and foreign influence. The discussion took place outside the advice and consent of the United States, much to the displeasure of the administrations of Carter and then Reagan. Democracy remained a point of contention in Nicaraguan politics and between Managua and Washington. The Sandinistas and other participants of the 1981 forum agreed that the democracy of Nicaragua would not look like the democracy sought by President Reagan. The Sandinistas seemed to accept democracy only to the extent that it served what party leadership saw as the national interest.

2. Counterrevolution

For both the Carter and Reagan administrations, creating democracy in Nicaragua served objectives in national security and human rights, but each administration pursued democracy through different political ideology and strategy. Once the Somoza regime fell, the Carter administration chose to offer friendship and financial assistance to the Sandinista government with the hope that the United States could maintain some influence over Nicaraguan politics and guide a transition to democracy favorable to the U.S. worldview. Carter also wanted to keep ties with moderates in the government and private sector to help them into positions of power in Managua, which served the cause of anti-communism.³⁶ Reagan pursued democracy and human rights in Nicaragua by rejecting the legitimacy of the Sandinistas and offering support to what he called the democratic opposition, or the

³⁶ Karen De Young, "Nicaraguan Guardsmen Made Prisoners of War; Nicaragua Makes Guardsmen POWs; Security Risk Cited," *The Washington Post*, July 25, 1979, LexisNexis Academic.

Contras. For Reagan, human rights came from democracy, and democracy came from aggressive opposition to communism, which, in Nicaragua, came through the Contras.

Before Carter provided funding to the Nicaraguans, administration officials wanted to see evidence that the Sandinistas would fulfill their pledge to the OAS to respect human rights. Managua found conditions on aid highly offensive. Nicaragua faced a pressing need for national reconstruction after a war to unseat a dictator who personally drained the treasury and who was known for human rights abuses while receiving financial and military support from the United States for decades.³⁷ U.S. policy toward Nicaragua aid reflected the underlying tension between the two governments over human rights. The Nicaraguans wanted to address poverty, hunger, and unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity while Washington relied on democratic institutions to preserve human rights. Until those institutions existed, Washington preferred a staunchly anti-communist, though authoritarian, ally in Nicaragua, which led the Carter and Reagan administrations to support an armed counterrevolutionary movement.

Washington did initially provide the requested financial aid to Nicaragua. First, Congress approved nearly \$9 million in aid, which the administration designed and introduced to support the national reconstruction in Nicaragua and build closer ties between the two governments. The aid package earmarked \$8.8 million for reconstruction and price stabilization, while only \$23,600 went to military training

³⁷ Terri Shaw, "Nicaragua Seeks Funds for Arms; Nicaragua Seeks Financial Aid to Purchase Weapons; New Leaders Say They May Solicit Socialist Bloc Aid," *The Washington Post*, August 12, 1979, LexisNexis Academic.

for Sandinista soldiers at a U.S. base in Panama and to a tour of bases in the United States by Nicaraguan officers.³⁸ The Carter administration also asked Congress to appropriate \$75 million in Nicaragua aid for fiscal year 1980 to improve infrastructure, healthcare, housing, and education.³⁹ The administration hoped the investment could expand U.S. influence and further build relationships with the Nicaraguan government based on cooperation and nonintervention and strengthen ties to Nicaragua's private business sector, community organizations, press, and churches.⁴⁰ Carter also intended for the money to curb the influence of Cuba and to support human rights by aiding "those moderate and democratic Nicaraguans who are struggling to preserve individual freedoms, political pluralism, the democratic process, and a strong, free enterprise participation in their economy."⁴¹ Officials in the State Department believed that a strong private sector created a loyal and powerful counterweight to an anti-U.S. sentiment in Managua.⁴² Even as the State Department remained optimistic over future U.S.-Nicaragua relations, Carter hedged his bet by secretly funding armed anti-Sandinista groups forming in Nicaragua and Honduras.⁴³

³⁸ Karen De Young, "House Unit Votes \$9 Million in Aid for Nicaragua; House Unit Approves Aid for Nicaragua," *The Washington Post*, September 12, 1979, LexisNexis Academic.

³⁹ *Special Central American Assistance Act of 1979*, Public Law 96-257, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 94 (1980): 422-24.

⁴⁰ Jimmy Carter, "Statement on Signing H.R. 6081 Into Law. May 31, 1980," in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (1980), Monday, June 9, 1980*, Administration of Jimmy Carter (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 1017.

⁴¹ Jimmy Carter, "Announcement of the President's Determination Under the Foreign Assistance Act. September 12, 1980," in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (1980), Monday, September 15, 1980*, Administration of Jimmy Carter (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 1712.

⁴² *Special Central American Assistance Act of 1979*.

⁴³ Peace, *A Call to Conscience*, 18.

Carter's decision to build a relationship and offer financial assistance to the Nicaraguans received a skeptical, if not hostile, response from much of Washington guided by the Cold War politics of anti-communism and the Democratic Human Rights discourse. Nicaragua appeared to many as a threat to political freedom and civil liberties. The conservative-leaning Council for Inter-American Security referred to the FSLN as the "Sandinista Marxist Party of Nicaragua" and part of a plan of the Soviet Union to "communize first Central America and then all of Latin America." The organization declared Cuba and Nicaragua operated as central components to this plan.⁴⁴

Members of Congress expressed similar concerns about human rights in Central America and the Cold War implications of a Sandinista government. Those concerns carried through as conditions placed on the administration's allocation of the funds once the bill did win approval. Congress required Carter to certify that the Sandinistas did not support terrorism, a concern that arose from allegations that Nicaragua wanted to spread revolution and provided arms to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador who also allegedly had ties to the Cuban government. Carter would issue a report regarding the human rights conditions in Nicaragua that would alert Congress to any systematic restrictions on political and civil rights by the Sandinistas. The legislation required the president to stop payment if he determined Nicaragua presented a threat to security or to democratic institutions in other Latin American countries.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ "The Pink Sheet on the Left: America's Authoritative Report on Left-Wing Activities" (Washington, D.C.: Council for Inter-American Security, June 2, 1980), 3, Council for Inter-American Security Records, Box 7, Hoover Institution Archives.

⁴⁵ *Special Central American Assistance Act of 1979*, 423.

Months of debate and revisions of the Nicaraguan aid proposal raised concerns in Managua about the true intentions of the U.S. government. Sandinista leadership knew well the history of U.S. intervention in Latin America and often accused the United States of engineering a coup d'état in Chile in 1973 against Marxist president Salvador Allende. Managua remained vigilant against any such U.S. intervention in Nicaragua.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Congress did approve the \$75 million in aid for Nicaragua in early June 1980.⁴⁷ Carter did not sign the legislation until September 12, 1980, at which time he certified for Congress that the Nicaraguan government did not participate or support in terrorism or acts of violence against other countries.⁴⁸

The era of somewhat good feelings between the Nicaraguan government and the Carter administration ended when U.S. officials determined they had enough evidence to prove that the Sandinistas supplied arms to guerrillas in El Salvador. Carter then announced through a Presidential Determination to Congress in January 1981 that he had suspended further aid.⁴⁹ These findings confirmed suspicions in the White House and in Congress that an international communist conspiracy threatened Central America with totalitarianism. Nicaragua had not only aligned itself with communists but also actively participated in spreading communist revolution. In

⁴⁶ Dickey, "Revolutionary Unity Fades in Nicaragua As Problems Mount"; Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*.

⁴⁷ "Special Central American Assistance Act of 1979," 422; "The Politics of Nicaraguan Aid," *The Washington Post*, June 9, 1980, LexisNexis.

⁴⁸ Lee Lescaze, "President Approves Aid for Nicaragua; Carter Approves Aid Package of \$75 Million for Nicaragua," *The Washington Post*, September 13, 1980, LexisNexis Academic; Carter, "Announcement of the President's Determination Under the Foreign Assistance Act. September 12, 1980," 1712.

⁴⁹ "Presidential Determination on Nicaraguan Support for Salvadoran Guerrillas" (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, January 10, 1981), Accession number: EL01363, Digital National Security Archive.

addition to cutting aid, Carter secretly authorized an additional \$1 million for the CIA to lend support to anti-Sandinista organizations.⁵⁰

With the newly authorized funds, the CIA tapped into an opposition movement in Nicaragua that started to coalesce as soon as the Sandinistas took power in 1979. The dissent came from diverse sectors of the population, such as the business community, the wealthy, the middle class, rural peasants, and indigenous communities.⁵¹ Much of the opposition's various grievances centered on human rights and the belief that the Sandinistas did not represent the fulfillment of the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse articulated during and after the revolution. Moderates who fought against Somoza opposed the authoritarianism they saw emerging out of the new Sandinista regime.⁵² Others felt left out of the new Nicaragua, unable to see how the Sandinista reforms protected their economic, social, or cultural rights. The Sandinistas alienated the rural peasantry with agrarian reforms and the centralization of credit and consumer goods within the urban centers. Peasants also suffered from collectivization policies that created large scale farms for production, and they feared that the state intended to stop the traditional forms of agriculture by families in favor of cooperative production.⁵³ Indigenous people living along the Atlantic Coast opposed attempts to incorporate them within a revolutionary state and suffered brutal repression in response. The Sandinistas claimed throughout

⁵⁰ Ariel C. Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977-1984* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1997), 154–55.

⁵¹ Clifford, "The Nicaraguan Resistance," 2; Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977-1984*, 109.

⁵² Clifford, "The Nicaraguan Resistance," 2; Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977-1984*, 112.

⁵³ Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977-1984*, 109–12.

the 1980s that their policies and reforms created economic opportunity for Nicaraguans, improved the standard of living, increased production, and provided improved access to social welfare programs, health care, and education. However, failing to adequately address the human rights arguments of influential sectors of the population consistently undercut that argument.

The Sandinistas' failures to address human rights demands of the Nicaraguan people also produced the unyielding counterrevolutionary movement. Individuals within the various sectors of society came together to form armed and non-armed opposition groups. Among the armed opposition, many joined with displaced members of the former National Guard. Those who took up arms against the government were referred to generally as Contras. Carter first offered support to the Contras, but Reagan greatly enhanced the U.S. commitment, in dollars and in political capital, as part of his broader, more aggressive approach to communism.

“I believe that U.S. promotion of human rights and support for democracy in the Western Hemisphere reinforce each other. History shows us that the most effective guarantee of human rights lies in the creation and strengthening of open democratic institutions of government.” According to Reagan, broad representation of a nation's people within democratic governments led democracies to protect human rights. Because of that broad representation, democracies enjoyed more stability, were reluctant to use violence, and produced more continuity in policy.⁵⁴ However, failing to embrace democracy indicated to the president that a nation

⁵⁴ “Responses to Questions Submitted by Latin American Newspapers November 30, 1982,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1982 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), 1529–30.

rejected freedom and civil liberties, thus human rights. No middle ground existed in this Cold War context. Therefore, Nicaragua's seeming embrace of communism and Soviet and Cuban friendship created a threat to human rights and to security in the Americas.

Claims that the Sandinistas supported Salvadoran rebels through arms shipments reinforced concerns about the danger of communists in Nicaragua and the threat to democracy, prompting both the Carter and Reagan administrations to support the Contras.⁵⁵ A large capture of documents indicating that one hundred tons of military supplies had reached the insurgents through Cuba and Nicaragua and that several hundred tons more were still coming bolstered the U.S. case.⁵⁶ In addition, a CIA report from the summer of 1981 identified Nicaragua as a pawn in a larger plan of the Soviets and Cubans for spreading communism in the Western Hemisphere and predicted that Nicaragua would continue to slide further toward totalitarianism.⁵⁷

The situation in Nicaragua seemed to be getting more dangerous to U.S. interests, but analysts cautioned that anything looking like intervention by the United States to support counterrevolution would arouse anti-American sentiment in Latin American nations already sensitive to a history of U.S. intervention.⁵⁸ Instead of direct military action against the Sandinistas, Reagan first used economic pressure to force change. Reagan followed Carter's lead by terminating all remaining financial

⁵⁵ Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy: U.S. Policy Toward Latin America in the Reagan Years* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 82.

⁵⁶ Robert E. White and U.S. Department of State, Office of the Secretary, "Foreign Support of Salvadoran Insurgency," Cable, (January 31, 1981), p. 1-4, Accession number: EL00703, Digital National Security Archive.

⁵⁷ Director of Central Intelligence, "Insurgency and Instability in Central America," National Intelligence Estimate (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, September 15, 1981), 1-13, Accession number: EL00065, Digital National Security Archive.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

assistance to Nicaragua and cutting off loans from the United States.⁵⁹ The president also expanded the covert operation of supporting the insurgent Contras by increasing funding levels and expanding the scope of the operation.⁶⁰ Through a secret Presidential Finding in March 1981, Reagan authorized the CIA to organize, train, and equip an anti-Sandinista guerrilla army.⁶¹ The Committee on Intelligence in the U.S. House of Representatives approved the covert operation for the sole objective of stopping the flow of arms to Salvadoran insurgents. The committee prohibited operations intended to overthrow the Sandinista government or provoke a conflict between Nicaragua and neighboring Honduras.⁶²

The administration joined its covert counterrevolution with a public diplomacy strategy of attacking the human rights record of the Sandinistas and branding Nicaragua as a totalitarian state in the making. Over time, Reagan and his administration appropriated the language of human rights from progressive NGOs and Democrats to improve the image of its foreign policy and win support for anti-Sandinista groups.⁶³ Ironically, the administration also used the covert Contra operation to create a human rights crisis in Nicaragua, correctly anticipating that the Sandinistas would respond to the Contra threat through repression.

⁵⁹ Roy Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy: The Making of American Policy in Nicaragua, 1981-1987* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 35–38.

⁶⁰ Peter Kornbluh, “The Covert War,” in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 21; Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977-1984*, 36.

⁶¹ Ronald Reagan, “Finding Pursuant to Section 662 of The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, As Amended, Concerning Operations Undertaken by the Central Intelligence Agency in Foreign Countries, Other Than Those Intended Solely for the Purpose of Intelligence Collection” (Washington, D.C., December 1, 1981), Document number NI01414, Understanding the Iran-Contra Affairs, Brown University, https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding_the_Iran_Contra_Affair/documents/d-all-45.pdf.

⁶² Peace, *A Call to Conscience*, 20.

⁶³ Edward A. Lynch, *The Cold War's Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), ix–x.

3. The Sandinista Threat to Human Rights

Until the public learned the full scope of the Contra operation, the Reagan administration laid the groundwork for aggressive anti-communist policies by branding the Sandinistas as human rights violators. Reagan consistently demonized the Sandinistas for the forced relocation of indigenous people on the Nicaragua Atlantic Coast and the destruction and violence that followed. White House officials pointed to Managua's policies of repression and press censorship as signs of a strengthening totalitarian state. Reagan also consistently reminded the public of the Sandinistas' broken promise to the OAS to hold elections.

The Sandinista treatment of indigenous people served as the administration's strongest evidence for human rights abuse. Before the Permanent Council of the OAS, Reagan reminded the world that the Nicaraguan government had admitted to the "forced relocation of about 8,500 Miskito Indians." He also declared that his administration had "clear evidence that since late 1981, many Indian communities have been burned to the ground and men, women, and children killed."⁶⁴ The example and the imagery worked well for Reagan to demonstrate the brutal nature of the Sandinista government.

Conditions on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua were quite different from that on the Pacific. Sandinista officials of the urbanized Pacific Coast wanted to bring the modernizing reforms of the revolution to the more rural and sparsely populated

⁶⁴ Ronald W. Reagan, "Address Before the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States. February 24, 1982," in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (1982), Monday, March 1, 1982*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1982 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), 221.

Atlantic Coast.⁶⁵ Miskito, Mayanga, and Rama Indians and creoles occupied the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, mostly in Zelaya Province. Most of the Indian population was Miskito, and the total number of Indians in 1979 was between 100,000 and 175,000. No large landowners dominated the area, and farmers had access to whatever land they needed. Some communities participated in communal land ownership in which a community member could use land not then in use. Also, the indigenous people did not usually receive services from the national government. If they received social services, those typically came from local church organizations or other charities.⁶⁶ They maintained a separate culture and spoke indigenous languages and English.⁶⁷

The Sandinistas tried to incorporate these indigenous groups into the national project of revolutionary reconstruction, imposing upon them programs of agrarian reform, education, and health care and threatening cultural identity.⁶⁸ The Nicaraguan government also engaged in economic development and infrastructure projects designed to increase the production capacity of the region.⁶⁹ These programs served to extend services to the Nicaraguan people while the government programs also extended government participation and/or control over society, which the indigenous groups on the Atlantic Coast resisted.⁷⁰ The Sandinistas who worked with

⁶⁵ "Programa Mnimo Del F.S.L.N.," 8.

⁶⁶ Martin Diskin, "The Manipulation of Indigenous Struggles," in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 84.

⁶⁷ Clifford, "The Nicaraguan Resistance," 11.

⁶⁸ Diskin, "The Manipulation of Indigenous Struggles," 84.

⁶⁹ Peter Sollis, "The Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: Development and Autonomy," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 21, no. 3 (October 1989): 500.

⁷⁰ "Groups of the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance: Who Are They?," Resource Paper (Washington, D.C.: US Department of State, April 1985), 6, Latin American Strategic Studies Institute papers, Box 1, Hoover Institution Archives.

the indigenous groups held prejudices against Atlantic Coast people, believing them to be backward in culture, religion, and agriculture and in need of modern reforms.⁷¹

In the face of these challenges, the Miskito people maintained a strong community and developed a militancy to their politics as some leaders advocated for autonomy and even sovereignty for indigenous peoples.⁷²

The Sandinista government committed one of its most visible human rights violations when it forcibly relocated indigenous communities in reaction to the perceived threats to the government and the alleged ties to the Contras. The Nicaraguan military forced approximately eight thousand Miskitos to move from the Coco River region to five new settlements fifty miles south. Another ten thousand fled to neighboring Honduras as refugees.⁷³ President Reagan saw to it that the Nicaraguans paid an enormous political price for this operation. The Reagan administration argued that the treatment of the Miskito Indians revealed the brutality of a totalitarian government in Managua, and the administration provided arms, training, and funding for indigenous resistance. The administration intended to use the mistreatment as propaganda while maintaining tension among the two groups to undermine the Sandinista government.⁷⁴

Elsewhere in Nicaragua, the U.S. Embassy reported rising tensions and a growing siege mentality among Nicaraguan leadership that prompted ever greater levels of repression. In early 1982, Minister of the Interior Tomás Borge warned his colleagues of growing activity of separatist groups and counterrevolutionary groups,

⁷¹ Diskin, "The Manipulation of Indigenous Struggles," 84.

⁷² "Groups of the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance: Who Are They?," 6.

⁷³ Sollis, "The Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: Development and Autonomy," 508.

⁷⁴ Diskin, "The Manipulation of Indigenous Struggles," 80–87.

of attempted sabotaging or hijacking of airplanes, and of attacks on the Nicaraguan military. Borge also noted anxiety within the government about the counterrevolutionary groups operating in Costa Rica and a meeting in Costa Rica of opposition leaders including Alfonso Robelo. Ortega communicated the same unease about his government's survival when he spoke at a mass meeting in Managua on February 21, 1982. Ortega accused the Reagan administration of funding the counterrevolutionary forces responsible for bombing the Managua airport the previous night and warned that those same U.S.-funded counterrevolutionaries planned to kill members of the FSLN to weaken the unity of the government. As Reagan and officials in his administration refused to comment on CIA ties to the Contras, Ortega declared Reagan's silence served as confirmation that the United States sponsored terrorism in Nicaragua.⁷⁵ The Sandinistas knew of Reagan's plans to aggressively provoke confrontation in Nicaragua, having obtained a previously confidential report produced for then-candidate Reagan by a team of foreign policy advisers. Commonly known as the "Santa Fe Document," the report declared war was the normal state of international relations and that Latin America was one of the hot spots for World War III, a conflict in which the United States already found itself with communists. To respond to the grave threat, the United States needed to reassert hegemonic control over the Western Hemisphere through military and economic means. The Sandinistas took this report as a direct threat.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Ortega still

⁷⁵ Roger R. Gamble to U.S. Department of State, "Sabotage Plot: Summary of Counter-Revolutionary Activities," Cable, January 14, 1982, 2–3, Digital National Security Archive.

⁷⁶ Ronald Reagan, "Documento Secreto de La Política Reagan Para América Latina" (Managua, Nicaragua: Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, c 1980), Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica.

intended to carry out the revolution's goals of pluralism in society and politics and peace in Central America, but now he would use a heavier hand of government to implement reform and defend the state.⁷⁷

The threats that preoccupied Borge and Ortega led the Nicaraguan government to impose severe restrictions on its citizens, which supported the claims of the Reagan administration that the Sandinistas intended on creating a totalitarian state. On March 15, 1982, the Communications Media Directorate declared the government believed there existed a “conspiracy against our people and their revolution, promoted by the current administration of the U.S. Government...”⁷⁸ Ortega accused the CIA of directing the bombing of bridges. Nicaraguan officials had also speculated that other incidents of sabotage were part of a larger coordinated operation.⁷⁹ The Nicaraguan government declared a state of National Emergency beginning March 15 and suspended “all radio newscasts, political party opinion programs or those of any other organizations.” It required that all “radio stations... join in network with The Voice of Nicaragua... for the transmission of the newscast ‘The Voice of the Defense of the Fatherland’.” In addition, all written media publications needed to be submitted to the Communications Media Directorate for review before publishing. The government declared that the restrictions would last as long as the national emergency continued.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Gamble to U.S. Department of State, “Sabotage Plot: Summary of Counter-Revolutionary Activities,” 2–3.

⁷⁸ “Nicaraguan Government Establishes Control of Media: Communique Released by Communications Media Directorate on March 15, 1982” March 15, 1982, Box 1, Central America Working Group Records (DG 145), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁷⁹ “CIA Accused of Sabotage; Nicaraguans Sign Up For Volunteer Militias,” *The Washington Post*, March 17, 1982, sec. First, LexisNexis Academic.

⁸⁰ “Nicaraguan Government Establishes Control of Media.”

The Sandinista government also restricted the activity and organizing of opposition political groups, private sector organizations, media outlets, and labor organizations through laws designed to suppress opposition and free speech. The state restricted freedom of movement and prevented opposition leaders from leaving the country. The Sandinistas prohibited any further discussion in the Council of State regarding restrictions on media and political parties. Security forces arrested people out of suspicion for their ties to counterrevolutionaries. CIA analysts also concluded that the Nicaraguan government held nearly five thousand political prisoners, many of whom reported torture or had been killed in custody.⁸¹ Intelligence analysts determined that when Nicaraguan officials believed opposition forces posed a threat to the revolution, the human rights violations would increase as the Nicaraguan government defended itself.⁸² Operation planners wanted to continue pushing the Sandinistas into human rights violations and then accuse the Sandinistas of human rights violations.

The administration and its supporters in Congress used the human rights violations to attack the legitimacy of the Nicaraguan government. Jesse Helms (R-NC), chairman of the Senate's Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs for the Committee on Foreign Relations, conducted a hearing over human rights conditions in Nicaragua in November 1981 after reports of Indians killed along the Atlantic Coast. Helms noted that reports accused the Sandinistas of "burning entire villages to

⁸¹ "Nicaraguan Military Buildup" (Central Intelligence Agency, March 22, 1982), 10–12, Digital National Security Archive.

⁸² Anthony C.E. Quainton, "Sandinista Revolution after Three Years," Cable, Nicaragua: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1978-1990. (Government & Official Publications, July 17, 1982), 2–6, Digital National Security Archive.

the ground, burning people alive, burying them alive – a systematic, thorough, and sustained program of extermination. . . .”⁸³ His witness, Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, felt confident that naïve, if not dangerous, impressions of governments like that in Nicaragua would “be eliminated by a sober, informed and consistent balance in our approach to human rights.”⁸⁴ The FSLN did not offer a novel form of governance or an expansive defense of rights. The FSLN was a violent threat to national security and regional stability.

Abrams testified that the Sandinistas consistently restricted civil liberties as the government moved closer to the Soviets and other communist countries. The Sandinista government’s pursuit of pluralism and respect for justice, as promised through the revolution, had eroded since 1979 as it put elections off until 1985 claiming that the people had chosen their leaders and voted through the revolution. The Sandinistas also packed the Council of State with their own party members rather than maintain it as an institution for political debate and opposition as appropriate in a democracy, which, according to Abrams, was consistent with the larger move by the Sandinistas to reduce the freedom of political expression and dissent. The Sandinistas restricted freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and workers’ rights to strike and to bargain for better pay. As proof of Nicaragua’s participation within a global operation to advance communist revolution, Abrams pointed out that Nicaragua hosted approximately six thousand Cubans supposedly as

⁸³ U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, *Human Rights in Nicaragua: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 97th cong., 2nd sess., 1982, 1.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

advisers, including as many as two thousand military advisers. Nicaragua also housed advisers from other communist countries such as North Korea, East Germany, Bulgaria, and the Soviet Union.⁸⁵

Treatment of the Miskito, Mayanga, and Rama Indians was the most disturbing behavior by the Sandinista government, according to Abrams, and demonstrated the government's true nature. Abrams testified that, "[u]sing the transparent and flimsy excuse of development plans, and alleged desire to integrate the Miskitos into the rest of society, the Sandinistas have viciously attacked these Indians tribes, killing many Indians."⁸⁶ He further cited a report by Freedom House, issued on February 22, 1982, that described

forced mass evacuation of Indian communities, 20 villages emptied, 5 firebombed, and many Indians placed in what they called 'protected' hamlets; the burial alive of 15 Indians...; imprisonment or expulsion of clergy and Indian leaders; and destruction of the Indians' economic and political as well as religious institutions.⁸⁷

However, Abrams claimed to know nothing of Miskitos in military operations against the Nicaragua government, and he suspected that Sandinistas alleged Miskitos joined anti-government forces as a propaganda technique to legitimize security operations against the Miskitos and the relocation camps.⁸⁸

While Abrams's testimony identified verifiable human rights abuses by the Sandinista government, the specific conduct that amounted to human rights violations did not concern the administration as much as the larger threat of a

⁸⁵ Ibid., 3-5.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, *Human Rights in Nicaragua*, 14.

communist Nicaragua. An exchange with Senator Edward Zorinsky (D-NE) revealed the administration's priorities in terms of human rights. Zorinsky asked how the United States could support Guatemala and El Salvador when both those governments adopted policies of even greater repressive force than that of Nicaragua. Abrams declined to take issue with Zorinsky's characterization of the human rights record of Guatemala or El Salvador. Instead, Abrams claimed that the State Department did not make comparisons when forming policy, but "the problem with Nicaragua is, of course, where it is heading. In El Salvador you have a government committed to heading toward democracy." For Abrams, the pursuit of democracy, or the appearance of that pursuit, served as a determinative factor in weighing the significance of human rights abuses. "[W]hat we are seeing in El Salvador is a government attempting to have a free election to move toward democracy, and in Nicaragua a government attempting to destroy democracy."⁸⁹ Abrams took the position that a country did not necessarily need to meet specific human rights requirements and that "as long as it has a good political purpose," it could receive aid and friendship from the United States.⁹⁰

The president made similar comparisons between El Salvador and Nicaragua before the OAS. Reagan declared that Nicaragua had served as an incubator for violence through paramilitary insurgencies since the Sandinistas took power in 1979. Furthermore, Nicaraguans failed to fulfill the promises made in 1979 to the OAS that the Sandinista government would uphold human rights and hold free elections. "Two years later, these commitments can be measured by the postponement of elections

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 23.

until 1985, by repression against free trade unions, against the media, minorities, and in defiance of all international civility....”⁹¹ El Salvador, however, implemented land reform and, according to Reagan, successfully pursued democracy. The Salvadoran government also encouraged guerrillas to lay down their arms and to participate in the electoral process. Reagan then altered the historical narrative of imperialism in Latin America to a more favorable Cold War context in which the Soviet Union, not the United States, violated self-determination and national sovereignty. Reagan contrasted Nicaragua and El Salvador within the Soviet imperialism construct, emphasizing the political and military domination by the Soviets over states such as Nicaragua while the people of El Salvador, free from foreign influence, pursued their own path toward democracy.⁹²

The president again raised the issue of self-determination and democracy in a revealing exchange with Venezuelan intellectuals and political leaders. More than two hundred Venezuelans wrote to the president in September 1982 asking that he exercise restraint and practice a policy of non-intervention in Central America to promote peace and self-determination. These notable Venezuelans expressed concern that the tension in Central America would explode into a regional war and draw in other Latin American countries. Reagan sympathized with their concern over a widening war. Yet, the president identified communist intervention as the greatest threat to peace in Central America while he also proclaimed his intent to defend the right to self-determination. He blamed the regional instability on political and

⁹¹ Reagan, “Address Before the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States. February 24, 1982,” 221.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 217–22.

economic underdevelopment in Central America and on the Soviets, Cubans, and Nicaraguans taking advantage of the social and economic weakness of countries to spread communism.⁹³ Reagan declined to address the potential, or on-going, U.S. intervention in the region, but he did offer that the United States government would provide up to \$350 million in funds for economic development to Central America and Caribbean nations. He further pledged to continue helping develop democratic institutions among allied nations and support that development through such events as conferences intended to build skills and experiences in democratic governance and participation. “The commitment to democracy, self-sustaining economic development and non-intervention which we [the United States and Venezuela] share does not, however, characterize the action of Nicaragua, Cuba and the Soviet Union.” He argued that the communist nations supported the insurgency in El Salvador while Honduras and Costa Rica suffered from attacks of Nicaraguan terrorists.⁹⁴

Jeane Kirkpatrick, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, further clarified the administration’s position on human rights and the narrow focus on the connection to democracy. Kirkpatrick disputed claims for economic or social rights, arguing that those “rights” were goals to which people should aspire but not demand from governments. The Sandinista declarations of principles upon which the government would be established emphasized social equality, economic opportunity, access to land and resources, and government services such as education and health

⁹³ “Exchange of Letters with Prominent Venezuelans. November 5, 1982,” in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (1982), Monday, November 8, 1982*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1982 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), 1439–41.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1440.

care. Yet Kirkpatrick reasoned “that rights should not be confused with wishes, or goals, and that the list of human rights cannot be indefinitely lengthened like a shopping list in a global supermarket.” The Reagan administration elevated as human rights only political and civil rights, such as the right to vote, to peacefully assemble, to free speech and to due process, above all other claimed rights. According to Kirkpatrick, those rights were “the prerequisites to other social and economic rights” because political and civil rights depended on government restraint. She emphasized that the state of the economy meant nothing to those basic rights that depended on government inaction, and the government should not be held responsible for economic development or industrialization of the nation. A government should be held responsible for its policies concerning the exercise of power and control over its citizens.⁹⁵

In the eyes of administration officials such as Abrams and Kirkpatrick, the Nicaraguan government exercised little restraint toward its people and engaged in policies of repression since coming to power in 1979. The repression to which the Reagan administration referred only increased as the Nicaraguan government consolidated power over subsequent years. The Sandinistas moved against each segment of society to assert its control over them while also building up a large military and security force to impose its will.⁹⁶ Reagan and his administration saw democracy as the answer to the repression in Nicaragua pursued policies in furtherance of democracy promotion in Nicaragua in the form of counterrevolution through the Contras.

⁹⁵ U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, *Human Rights in Nicaragua*, 62.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

4. The Contra Opposition

Progressive NGOs operating in the United States and devoted to peace in Nicaragua rejected the Democratic Human Rights discourse as articulated by the Reagan administration. Instead, NGOs tried to influence U.S. foreign policy through their own human rights advocacy based on the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse. NGOs also called for greater recognition of the importance of human rights for U.S. foreign policy. While the goals and underlying ideology were very similar, the messaging of NGOs differed. The organizations deployed a variety of strategies in defense of human rights based on the organization's origins, constituency, structure, and political agenda. As the conflict in Nicaragua wore on through the 1980s, the different agendas and strategies for influencing policy translated into varied levels of success in Washington. Yet each organization offered important contributions to push a human rights discourse into the debate over Nicaragua policy and forced the Reagan administration to engage human rights as a factor in its public diplomacy, if not official diplomacy. Despite their different approaches to human rights advocacy and their different membership, they all sought peace in Nicaragua, which led organizations such as the Nicaraguan Network, CFNFP, and WOLA to work together in nation-wide grassroots campaigns and lobbying efforts.

The Nicaragua Network, originally called the National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People, operated as a solidarity organization claiming to support the Nicaraguan people and the Sandinista reforms through fundraising and grassroots organizing. Solidarity organizations in the United States advocated on behalf of a

nation or people, such as El Salvador or Nicaragua. The solidarity movement emerged from the influential coalitions of religious organizations and peace organizations that lobbied Congress toward the end of the Vietnam War in the early 1970s.⁹⁷ The Nicaragua Network grew to be the largest Nicaragua solidarity organization in the United States.⁹⁸

As a solidarity organization, the Nicaragua Network differed from other NGOs working against Reagan's Nicaragua policy because its primary objective was to support the Sandinista government and Nicaraguan Revolution in the United States. It explicitly supported Sandinista reforms and argued that the Sandinista government stood for and defended human rights. Other NGOs such as CFNFP occasionally acknowledged the benefits of Sandinista reforms but mainly directed their efforts against the detrimental effects of U.S. policy. Analysis of the Nicaragua Network's records does not reveal the organization took orders from the FSLN or engaged in close collaboration with the Nicaraguan government at an organizational level. The Nicaragua Network did provide a U.S.-based voice that could translate the policies and ideas of the Sandinistas into a palatable, effective message for the United States.

In February 1979, Nicaraguan refugees, small Nicaragua solidarity groups from around the country, human rights organizations, and religions organizations formed the Nicaragua Network to construct a grassroots support network within the United States. Prior to the Sandinista victory, Nicaraguan refugees directed the

⁹⁷ Gosse, "Active Engagement," 22–29, 42.

⁹⁸ "Proposal of a Tour of Nicaraguans, Victims of Destabilization" (Washington, D.C., 1982), 3, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society.

operations of the Nicaragua Network in major cities like New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington in the late 1970s to educate the public about the horrors of the Somoza government and to generate support for the revolution.⁹⁹ Through their leadership and participation in the Nicaragua Network, exiles played a significant role in the initial phase of activism against Somoza and then in support of the Sandinista government.¹⁰⁰ Activist and scholar Van Gosse found the Nicaragua Network was very successful in organizing demonstrations in support of the Sandinistas during and after the revolution.¹⁰¹ The Nicaragua Network was so adept at mobilizing activists that *The Washington Post* noted the organization's uncommon ability to "raise the ire of their counterparts who [supported] Reagan." The solidarity organizations associated with El Salvador and Guatemala also worked closely with the Nicaragua Network and organized demonstrations against U.S. policy in Central America and the United States militarizing political conflicts.¹⁰²

Organizers of the Nicaragua Network in its first years focused on informing the American public about the Sandinista Revolution and government and about U.S. policy toward Nicaragua in the context of Sandinista reforms and efforts to rebuild the country. The organization hoped to mobilize concerned citizens to change U.S. policy toward Nicaragua to one based on the ideology of the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse, seeking "peace with justice, mutual respect and the right to self-determination."¹⁰³ This articulation of human rights through justice and self-

⁹⁹ Peace, *A Call to Conscience*, 65.

¹⁰⁰ "National Network Strategy in 1985-A Plan of Action" (National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People, 1985), Nicaragua Network Records, Box 3, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁰¹ Gosse, "Active Engagement," 25.

¹⁰² Terri Shaw, "Mimeographs Roar in Propaganda War: Handout-to-Handout Warfare on Central American Policy," *The Washington Post*, March 7, 1982, LexisNexis Academic.

¹⁰³ "Proposal of a Tour of Nicaraguans, Victims of Destabilization," 3.

determination matched the Sandinista pronouncements of principles underpinning the new government.

Attitudes in Washington in 1980 turned decidedly against Nicaragua, a development that caught the Nicaragua Network by surprise, and the presidential campaign of that year painted an even darker picture for future U.S.-Nicaragua relations. In March 1980, after the \$75 million aid package stalled in Congress, the Nicaragua Network's Coordinating Committee concluded that the organization should emphasize building political support in the United States for the revolution to prevent Nicaragua's isolation internationally.¹⁰⁴ The organization wanted to correct what members saw as a misinformation campaign against the Nicaraguan government. Members of the organization's Implementation Committee found that the U.S. media presented a "distorted and negative" view of Nicaragua. The organization's leadership determined that the Nicaragua Network would respond by developing contacts with national and local media, sending letters to national and local newspaper editors, issuing press releases from the National Office, organizing mass demonstrations, and offering testimonials from people returning from Nicaragua.¹⁰⁵

As the Reagan administration publicly linked the Sandinistas with the Soviets and Cubans and sought to isolate the Nicaraguan state, the Nicaragua Network countered through arguments in human rights that established the Nicaraguan

¹⁰⁴ "Minutes - Coordinating Committee Meeting" (Washington, D.C.: National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People, March 29, 1980), 1-3, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 3, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁰⁵ "Minutes of the Implementations Committee Meeting" (Washington, D.C.: National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People, April 27, 1980), 2, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 2, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Revolution as a social and political movement against repression and foreign interference. The organization referred to the revolution as “a popularly-supported, pluralistic and democratic process.” Furthermore, the organization argued that the reforms by the Sandinistas formed a better Nicaragua through a mixed economy of government-managed natural resources and property working with a robust private sector and government run social programs to ensure equal opportunity in society. The Sandinistas more efficiently and equitably managed the economy than had the Somozas, and these reforms served the needs of the people. The FSLN confiscated all land and property owned by Somoza and his friends, which amounted to nearly a third of the national economy. According to the Nicaragua Network, the state then utilized resources and the land for the benefit of the Nicaraguan people. Also, the mixed economy model best served the unique interests and needs of Nicaragua. While the government nationalized natural resources and minerals and took control over the nation’s foreign trade, sixty percent of the nation’s economy remained in the private sector “with the understanding that workers’ rights and the national interest must prevail over narrow profit motivation.” These measures gave the people equal access to land, fair wages, appropriate working conditions, union organization, an improved standard in living between 1979 and 1981, and reductions to the unemployment rate.¹⁰⁶

The Nicaragua Network contrasted the Sandinista government’s policies with the destabilizing militarism of the United States government in Central America. As the Sandinistas implemented reforms, Reagan authorized large military exercises

¹⁰⁶ “Nicaragua: Supporting the Revolution” (Washington, D.C., 1981), Nicaragua Network Records, Box 19, Wisconsin Historical Society.

with Honduras to intimidate Managua, increased CIA involvement in Contra operations, and ordered the invasion of Grenada, all of which violated national sovereignty in Latin America and risked provoking a regional conflict.¹⁰⁷ However, calling for greater U.S. support for the Sandinistas using terms and ideas such as “collectivization,” which certainly sounded to Americans like communism, may have been tone deaf to the political and cultural environment of a 1980s United States steeped in Cold War anxieties. The Nicaragua Network’s strategy of proclaiming the greatness of Sandinista policies would continue to be a tough sell, and the organization would gradually shift tactics to focus on the human rights abuses committed by the Contras and the United States. Until then, the Nicaragua Network would have to address both the successes and failings in human rights by the Sandinistas.

Not all NGOs who advocated for peace and human rights in Nicaragua followed the Sandinista worldview or invested in the success of the Revolution. WOLA differed from the Nicaragua Network in approach and objective. WOLA remained independent from both the U.S. government and the Nicaraguan government, criticizing both for human rights violations. WOLA emphasized the importance of democracy for ensuring human rights, but it rejected the use of guerrilla fighters to create democracy. From its beginning, WOLA claimed to operate as an “impartial and nonpartisan” organization defending human rights in Latin America, building the institutions critical for democracy, shaping U.S. foreign policy to be more responsive to human rights in Latin America, and cooperating with

¹⁰⁷ “Editorial,” *Nicaraguan Perspectives*, Winter 1983, 1, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

like-minded organizations in the United States and abroad. WOLA considered itself as representing and providing leadership and coordination for organizations in Latin America and human rights organizations operating in the United States focused on Latin America.

Organizers wanted WOLA to serve the unique needs and perspectives of Latin Americans while also educating the U.S. public and policymakers in Washington. WOLA representatives offered nonpartisan, expert testimony in Congressional hearings over legislation or inquiries related to democracy and human rights in Latin America. It also organized visits from Latin American cultural and political leaders as part of its seminar programs that helped engage U.S. policymakers with Latin American concerns.¹⁰⁸ WOLA hosted Violetta Chamorro and Daniel Ortega, both members at the time of the Nicaraguan governing Junta, in August 1979 and hosted a reception for the Sandinistas in the WOLA office.¹⁰⁹ WOLA also conducted studies in Latin American countries, such as Nicaragua, to assess and report on human rights conditions and politics.¹¹⁰

WOLA articulated a position on human rights and the Sandinistas that gave the benefit of the doubt to the new Nicaraguan government and the reforms the Nicaraguans intended to enact to rebuild the country and shape society. WOLA also gave credit to the Sandinistas for attempting to resolve the human rights crisis

¹⁰⁸ "Meeting the Changing Challenges of Latin America Human Rights: 1991-1995" (Washington, D.C.: Washington Office on Latin America, May 1991), 1, box 26, folder: Ford Proposal, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

¹⁰⁹ "Joe Eldridge WOLA Storytime," October 27, 1993, 8, folder WOLA History Project (2003), box 28, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

¹¹⁰ "Meeting the Changing Challenges of Latin America Human Rights: 1991-1995," 1.

brought on by Somoza and the revolution. This position also revealed what WOLA stated in explicit terms elsewhere, that it defined human rights through the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse.¹¹¹ In contrast, the Reagan administration considered the very existence of the Sandinista government a threat to human rights in Nicaragua because of Sandinista connections to the Soviets and the apparent embrace of totalitarianism endangered democracy.

WOLA had taken a keen interest in U.S. policy and human rights well before the Sandinistas took power in July 1979. Religious organizations had lobbied officials in Washington on human rights policy throughout the 1970s, but they had little experience or knowledge of the legislative process. Their outrage over the coup in 1973 that deposed Salvador Allende in Chile and their presumption of U.S. involvement motivated these religious organizations to work with Joe Eldridge, a former Methodist missionary, to establish a permanent and professional presence in Washington to promote human rights in Latin America policy.¹¹² Founded in 1974 by Eldridge, WOLA received its initial funding from these religious organizations and gradually expanded its support base and acquired significant influence in Washington over Latin America policy.¹¹³

From its inception, WOLA took part in research and reporting on human rights conditions, lobbied policy makers, and engaged in activism.¹¹⁴ The organization provided information to churches and put out newsletters and press

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² “Joe Eldridge WOLA Storytime,” 1–2.

¹¹³ Shaw, “Mimeographs Roar in Propaganda War.”

¹¹⁴ Peace, *A Call to Conscience*, 113.

releases while also providing knowledgeable witnesses to testify before Congress.¹¹⁵ Leadership and participants in WOLA activities included prominent liberal political figures and members of Congress such as Representative Thomas Harkin (D-IA). Donald M. Fraser, then the mayor of Minneapolis but formerly a strong voice for human rights in Congress as a Democratic representative from Minnesota, also worked with WOLA.¹¹⁶ In addition, WOLA helped organize and lead the Nicaragua Network, and WOLA served as one of the Nicaragua Network's most influential voices in Washington throughout the Contra War.¹¹⁷

During the Sandinista insurgency WOLA published its *Special Updates* to highlight the repression and violence by the Somoza government. Its October 1978 report found that, on average, Somoza's National Guard killed three Nicaraguans each day for curfew violations. The report further stated that Somoza had demonstrated his "disdain for popular opinion, for human life, and for the welfare of the nation" by refusing to step down from office in the face of widespread dissent and demonstrations and "by his ordering the destruction of population centers." WOLA reasoned that Somoza would eventually step down, but his resignation would happen on terms of his choosing, which made the international community's engagement in the conflict's resolution to force out Somoza that much more critical.

¹¹⁸ Analysts also cautioned that even after the removal of Somoza, he could still

¹¹⁵ Shaw, "Mimeographs Roar in Propaganda War."

¹¹⁶ "Nicaragua: A Crisis of Relations," Special Update (Washington, D.C.: Washington Office on Latin America, February 1982), 11, Acc. 91A-099, Box 8, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹¹⁷ Peace, *A Call to Conscience*, 64.

¹¹⁸ "Special Update Latin America: Nicaragua" (Washington Office on Latin America, October 1978), 1, Acc. 99A-006, Box 2, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

control the government from his home in Miami and pursue a remilitarizing of the Nicaraguan state.¹¹⁹

Venezuela, Costa Rica, Mexico, Colombia, Barbados, Jamaica, the OAS, and officials from the Nicaraguan government who subsequently resigned or were fired all accused the Somoza government of human rights abuses, yet the United States government remained silent. WOLA argued that “[o]nly the Carter Administration appeared reluctant to define itself” with respect to Somoza’s human rights abuses and Nicaragua’s future.¹²⁰ The report contended that, unless the United States played an important role in supporting the new Nicaraguan government, Managua would look elsewhere for support. U.S. assistance would be fundamental for the new government to follow through on its intentions to build a pluralist society with a mixed economy and democratic government.¹²¹

Following the Sandinista triumph in July 1979, and unlike the Nicaragua Network, WOLA advocated for human rights in broad terms, taking jabs at both the Reagan administration and the new Nicaraguan government. In November of 1981, WOLA lodged an official protest with the Nicaraguan Ambassador in Washington for failing to stop or condemn rioting outside the home of Alfonso Robelo the previous month after he broke with the Sandinista government and resigned from the Junta. WOLA’s protest noted that this type of conduct by the government occurred with other opposition leaders, too. WOLA affirmed that it had been a supporter of

¹¹⁹ “Nicaragua: Echoes in Latin America,” Update Latin America (Washington, D.C.: Washington Office on Latin America, August 1979), 1, Acc. 99A-006, Box 2, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹²⁰ “Special Update Latin America: Nicaragua,” 2.

¹²¹ “Nicaragua: Echoes in Latin America,” 1.

the Nicaraguan government previously, yet it demanded that the government refrain from similar actions and restore its reputation internationally. It also condemned the imprisoning of three opposition leaders for political purposes.¹²²

Eldridge, speaking for WOLA, had hoped for better decisions from the Sandinistas. He argued that “the negative international consequences of the infringements of these rights are considerable. WOLA has been queried by a number of Congressional offices, including supporters of Nicaragua, for an explanation of these recent developments,” which WOLA had difficulty providing. Eldridge called on the Nicaraguan government to pursue policies that respected the rights of all while still pursuing the goals of the revolution.¹²³

Though not claiming affiliation with the Sandinistas, CFNFP was decidedly opposed to Reagan’s foreign policy. CFNFP used human rights arguments in its attempts to dismantle the U.S. Cold War narrative and challenge lawmakers to interpret politics in Nicaragua and elsewhere as localized matters of violence and inequality. Whereas WOLA provided reporting and participated in activism, CFNFP coordinated lobbying campaigns and organized grassroots activism much like the work of the Nicaragua Network. CFNFP had a much broader participation and constituency level than WOLA and wider base of support than did the Nicaragua Network. The Coalition formed in 1976 with a focus on peace and human rights but took a strong interest in Latin American issues, particularly in Central America. CFNFP played a leading role among anti-Contra War activists in lobbying Congress

¹²² Joseph T. Eldridge to Arturo Cruz, Letter, November 6, 1981, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 8, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹²³ Eldridge to Cruz, Letter, November 6, 1981.

and organizing demonstrations throughout the nation. The organization provided information on the progress of bills and provided “talking points” memos to its members and allies to communicate with their members of Congress. CFNFP also developed media campaigns, held press conferences, and issued periodic press releases in furtherance of its agenda.¹²⁴

The Coalition formed as a non-profit organization in Washington D.C. for “the promotion of social welfare....”¹²⁵ It operated based on the proposition that “a peaceful world must be built on cooperation, independence, social and economic justice, and environmental integrity....” As such, CFNFP initially focused its work on reducing the use of military force and intervention as components of U.S. foreign policy and growing the movement within the United States devoted to ending the arms race.¹²⁶ Members of the Coalition consisted of organizations from around the country that all paid fees to support the Coalition’s operation.¹²⁷ National organizations joining CFNFP needed to have an established national constituency, and local organizations needed to have a demonstrated ability in grassroots organizing in their communities.¹²⁸ By 1982, the Coalition had grown to operate on a budget of several hundred thousand dollars, and it anticipated further growth. The Coalition grew from an income of \$45,000 in 1976 to a projected revenue between \$476,000 and \$506,000 for 1982, with \$200,000 coming from foundations or large

¹²⁴ Peace, *A Call to Conscience*, 90.

¹²⁵ “Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy (Proposed) By-Laws,” October 10, 1978, Acc. 90A-113, Box 17, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹²⁶ “Policies and Procedures” (Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, August 2, 1982), 1, Acc. 90A-113, Box 17, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹²⁷ “Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy (Proposed) By-Laws,” 1–2.

¹²⁸ “Policies and Procedures,” 1–2.

donors.¹²⁹ CFNFP was one of the largest, most influential progressive advocacy organizations in the country. The *Congressional Quarterly* called the Coalition the “nerve center” for lobbying work in Washington on issues related to Central America.¹³⁰ Members of Congress, including Rep. Harkin or their staff, regularly attended CFNFP meetings.¹³¹

Because the organization was so large and engaged in diverse issues, CFNFP formed working groups that could take the lead in organizing and strategizing on specific issues or regions of the world and report back to CFNFP’s executive committee.¹³² CFNFP organized the Human Rights Working Group (HRWG) to focus efforts on human rights issues, and HRWG then narrowed the focus even further when it formed the Central America Working Group (CAWG). CAWG directed and organized the efforts of activists and progressive organizations devoted to human rights and peace in Central America.¹³³ Highlighting the influence and reach of the Coalition and its working groups, CFNFP noted in late 1982 that hundreds of grassroots activists from around the nation called CFNFP’s human rights organizers looking for information and planning materials.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ “Projected Revenues - 1982” (Washington, D.C.: Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, 1982), 1, Acc. 90A-113, Box 14, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹³⁰ “Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy Year-End Review: Board Meeting, November 16, 1982” (Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, November 16, 1982), 6, Acc. 90A-113, Box 17, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹³¹ “Board Meeting Minutes” (Washington, D.C.: Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, June 3, 1982), Acc. 90A-113, Box 17, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹³² “Policies and Procedures,” 5.

¹³³ Peace, *A Call to Conscience*, 64.

¹³⁴ “Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy Year-End Review: Board Meeting, November 16, 1982,” 6.

CFNFP advocated for human rights in U.S. policy broadly and with little regard for the actions of the Sandinista government. Unlike the Nicaragua Network, CFNFP did not advocate specifically for the Sandinistas or apply a similar human rights argument in support of the revolution. Also, in contrast to WOLA's human rights work, CFNFP did not engage in fact-finding missions or devote resources to building democracy in Latin America. CFNFP engaged in and organized lobbying campaigns that mobilized thousands of activists throughout the country and a core of progressive leaders in Washington throughout the course of the Contra War to change U.S. policy under Reagan and influence Congress and the American people. The Coalition used human rights as a method to shame legislators and the administration to change votes or policy regarding Contra funding.

However, the working groups of CFNFP were closer ideologically to the Nicaragua Network than was the national organization. Organized in 1979 out of concern for pervasive abuses of human rights throughout Central America, the Coalition's CAWG tended toward positions of solidarity with Nicaragua. CAWG held the United States largely responsible for the conditions in Central America because of Washington's "history of political and military intervention..., and because of its economic domination of the area." CAWG's Statement of Principles proclaimed that the CAWG supported self-determination for Central American people, creating the political, economic, and social institutions to best fit their needs, supported efforts to develop effective, responsive government, and understood human rights as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. CAWG also determined to "bring the policy of the United States in Central America into

conformity with its stated commitment to human rights.” To fulfill its principles toward Central America, CAWG concluded it would engage in fundraising for humanitarian aid for Central America, provide education to the public regarding Central America, communicate with government officials through a variety of means in order to influence policy, and publish articles and literature supportive of its principles.¹³⁵

CAWG led lobbying efforts to provide aid to the Nicaraguan people, sending to its members instructions to contact representatives in Congress and request they support Carter’s proposed legislation that provided \$75 million in aid to Nicaraguans. Writing on behalf of CAWG, Diane Passmore also requested contributions to HAND, the Nicaragua Network’s charitable organization formed to provide material and financial aid to Nicaraguans.¹³⁶ CAWG also maintained a close working relationship with Rep. David Bonior (D-MI), the chair of the House Democratic Task Force on Central America. Bonior lobbied other members of Congress and tracked diplomatic relations while also coordinating efforts with CAWG and other similar organizations. Bonior also spoke to the media on behalf of the Democrats to present the party’s position on Central American issues.¹³⁷

CAWG created three sub-committees, one for El Salvador, one for Guatemala, and one for Nicaragua to allow for appropriate focus on country-specific work. The Nicaragua sub-committee worked closely with the Coalition for a Free

¹³⁵ “Statement of Principles, Working Paper” (Central America Working Group, October 1979), Box 6, Central America Working Group Records (DG 145), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹³⁶ Diane Passmore to Friend, Letter, December 7, 1979, Box 6, Central America Working Group Records (DG 145), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹³⁷ Peace, *A Call to Conscience*, 92–93.

Nicaragua and other Nicaraguan exiles, lobbying officials in Washington and creating public education programs and forums. “The emphasis of the Nicaraguan Sub-Committee is on making available responsible coverage of current events in the continuing struggle of the Nicaraguan people to rebuild their country and to defend their self-determination.”¹³⁸

5. Conclusion

In the early 1980s, many in Congress still held to the philosophy that human rights abuses turned people and countries against U.S. objectives and proved counterproductive, if not immoral. Nevertheless, Nicaraguans and Americans stood at odds over how they interpreted human rights and the Nicaraguan Revolution. Nicaraguans defined human rights based on their experiences under the Somoza regime and under U.S. domination of the political and economic system in a manner similar to what other Latin American nations experienced throughout the twentieth century. Sandinista officials and revolutionaries believed that Latin American dependency, if not subservience, to U.S. policy and financial interests undermined sovereignty and contradicted self-determination, thereby creating inequality and repression. U.S. legal culture in the 1980s followed the Democratic Human Rights discourse, and it was through this legal culture and the conservative political climate in the United States that Reagan and neoconservatives interpreted the Sandinista revolution. Furthermore, by the end of 1981, Reagan had persuaded enough

¹³⁸ “Central America Working Group” (Philadelphia, PA: Central America Working Group, April 23, 1980), Box 6, Central America Working Group Records (DG 145), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

members of Congress on the intelligence committees to accept that the Sandinistas did present a threat to peace in Central America. However, NGOs advocating for peace in Nicaragua challenged the administration's interpretation of human rights and the Nicaraguan government. Though each of the largest and most influential NGOs maintained different objectives and deployed human rights advocacy in different ways, human rights advocacy formed a core component of their efforts to influence foreign relations. In addition, the common goal of peace in Nicaragua would bring these organizations into collaborative effort.

Human rights arguments continued to matter in the debate over Nicaragua policy. U.S. support for a paramilitary force in Central America raised more than just theoretical questions for Congress and the American public when details of the covert operation began to leak and after the U.S. media reported atrocities by the U.S.-backed Contras. As conditions in Nicaragua worsened, Reagan would adopt human rights language to soften the image of the Contras, further legitimize his policy of supporting counterrevolution, and undercut the credibility of the Sandinistas and the Contra opposition in the United States. Also, NGOs such as the Nicaragua Network continued to adapt their human rights arguments to reinterpret or sanitize the actions of the Sandinistas for a U.S. audience. Other, more neutral, NGOs would deploy entirely different human rights arguments condemning the Contras yet distancing themselves from the Sandinistas, providing evidence for both sides of the Contra War debate. NGOs and members of Congress advocating for peace would have to find a way to thread their arguments between the violent excesses of both governments, advocating for peace and a negotiated settlement

while at the same time denying the legitimacy of Reagan's anti-communism and Sandinista repression through authoritarianism.

**CHAPTER 2 – A LANGUAGE OF ADVOCACY AGAINST THE CONTRAS:
ANTICOLONIAL HUMAN RIGHTS IN NICARAGUA, 1982-1983**

The stakeholders of Nicaraguan politics not only interpreted events in human rights terms. They also operationalized human rights into a language of advocacy. Advocates addressed their arguments to the American electorate and the U.S. Congress because those groups determined the restrictions and survival of the Contra operation. Rights-based advocacy in Anticolonial Human Rights, particularly on an international scale, cut through the abstractions of ideology and political philosophy of the Cold War. It reframed the issues away from global communist takeovers to the more concrete concerns of preventing torture, of providing enough food to families, or of defending free speech. Human rights advocacy produced visceral reactions because it simplified international law to address injustice. Human rights could mobilize activists and stir emotions in voters in ways abstract arguments about international law could not.

Since taking power, the Sandinistas had accused the United States of supporting opposition groups, and NGOs in the United States had their own suspicions of eventual U.S. intervention. Reporting throughout 1983 revealed that the CIA did support and advise counterrevolutionaries and indicated that Reagan hoped to undermine the Sandinistas and force the Nicaraguans to make dramatic reforms. With this information, human rights advocacy for peace in Nicaragua moved into a new phase of greater urgency and consequence as NGOs and the Nicaraguan government assailed the Reagan administration. Members of Congress

also expressed their frustration with U.S. foreign policy and their concern for the human rights implications of U.S. support of the Contras.

The human rights rhetoric against the Contras reshaped the language through which the Reagan administration discussed the Contras and influenced the underlying premise for Nicaragua policy. The White House entered the human rights debate for fear of losing all support it needed from Congress and the American people. Reagan initially stayed silent as news reports began detailing the extent of the CIA's support of guerrilla attacks in Nicaragua, reports that confirmed past accusations. White House officials understood that anti-communism alone would not gain the political support Reagan needed to continue with his Nicaragua policy. Officials reasoned that public diplomacy based on human rights would more effectively make the case for a covert Contra operation while undermining the human rights positions of the opposition. Although Contra funding opponents held the initiative, administration officials planned new tactics to communicate how the Contras fought for human rights and how democracy served the human rights of all Nicaraguans.

1. A Secret No More

In 1982, the narrative surrounding the covert operation in Nicaragua spun out of the administration's control, leading to more criticism of Reagan's policy and forcing White House officials to reassess how they presented the conflict to the American people and to Congress. Through much of 1982, the country began learning that U.S. intelligence officials may have collaborated with guerrilla forces in

Central America to bring down the Nicaraguan government. NGOs had already identified U.S. involvement in the anti-Sandinista movement as a serious threat to human rights. The FSLN already considered the United States a threat to the government's continued survival. Reporting by outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* only confirmed these fears. As reporting continued through early 1982, the White House unsuccessfully tried to shape the narrative through leaks to deliver its own interpretation of events. However, a stunning series of reports in *Newsweek* in November 1982 revealed the details about the size of the U.S. commitment to counterrevolution in Nicaragua and left the administration scrambling to answer to angry members of Congress. The administration declined to comment publicly on the covert operation until well into 1983, at which time officials recalibrated Nicaragua policy as a mission for peace and human rights. In the meantime, human rights NGOs and the press effectively defined the Contra force as a threat to human rights while the Sandinistas accused the Reagan administration of imperialism.

In early 1982, reporters started uncovering counterrevolutionary activity in Central America with uncertain connections to the United States. In January, *The New York Times* first reported that anti-Castro Cubans and Nicaraguans had set up a camp in California to train for military operations against the Sandinista government.¹ *The Washington Post* reported in March that Reagan had approved a secret mission to support foreign governments organizing paramilitary operations to undermine the Sandinista government and the Cuban presence in Central America.

¹ "Around the Nation; Paramilitary Training Reported in California," *The New York Times*, January 12, 1982, sec. A, LexisNexis Academic.

The CIA received \$19 million to carry out the operation.² Less than a week later, Patrick E. Tyler and Bob Woodward of *The Post* alleged that Reagan authorized building a force of about 500 guerrilla fighters recruited from Nicaragua and Honduras to attack infrastructure points in Nicaragua such as power plants and bridges.³ Shortly after the Tyler and Woodward piece, sources offered a counter narrative, informing *The Times* that the administration did approve millions of dollars for Nicaragua but only as a part of a covert operation to strengthen moderate groups in Nicaragua under the direction of the CIA. The operation consisted only of financial support, according to officials within the administration, because Reagan had rejected proposals for supporting a paramilitary force in Central America.⁴

The counter narrative quickly faded away. In mid-March, *The Times*'s Leslie H. Gelb reported that Reagan had approved a CIA plan for a covert operation for Nicaragua. Gelb's sources confirmed that Reagan had approved \$19 million for the CIA to fund or otherwise support paramilitary forces against the Nicaraguan government. He reported that the administration had briefed the intelligence committees of both chambers of Congress about the operation and that members of Congress did not raise any objections at the time.⁵ As the narrative of a CIA-supported covert operation persisted, the president declined to comment on the

² Dan Oberforfer and Lee Lescaze, "More U.S. Effort Yields Less Result; Haig Finds Quick Solutions in Central America Slop from Grip; After Apparent Success, U.S. Policy Falts in Central America," *The Washington Post*, March 4, 1982, sec. First Section, LexisNexis Academic.

³ Patrick E. Tyler and Bob Woodward, "U.S. Approves Covert Plan In Nicaragua; U.S. Plans Covert Operations To Disrupt Nicaraguan Economy," *The Washington Post*, March 10, 1982, sec. First, LexisNexis Academic.

⁴ Philip Taubman, "U.S. Reportedly Sending Millions to Foster Moderates in Nicaragua," *The New York Times*, March 11, 1982, sec. A, LexisNexis Academic.

⁵ Leslie H. Gelb, "U.S. Said to Plan Covert Actions in Latin Region," *The New York Times*, March 14, 1982, Late City Final Edition edition, sec. Section 1, LexisNexis Academic.

matter, providing an opportunity for opponents to sow seeds of doubt in Congress by raising troubling human rights implications from a policy of spreading violence and destruction.

Foremost among those critics of Reagan's Nicaragua policy was CFNFP. As the conflicting reports began to surface about the CIA's covert operation in Nicaragua, the organization mobilized, revealing the national reach and diversity of strategy that would characterize its activism against the Contra War throughout the decade. The Coalition gathered several national organizations in March 1982 to coordinate activism against U.S. Nicaragua policy. Attendees represented religious organizations such as Christic Institute, Jesuit Missions, and the U.S. Catholic Mission Association. Marta Tannenhaus and Diane Passmore from the Nicaragua Network attended, as did George Lister, a well-known advocate of human rights in the U.S. State Department. Heather Foote, Joe Eldridge, and Reggie Norton represented WOLA, and Juan E. Mendez of AW attended. Cindy Buhl and Phil Lloyd-Sidle represented CFNFP. The group agreed their organizations should serve as "messengers [*sic*] of peace" and that the response from the peace organizations to the apparent militarization of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua and the rest of Central America should be "overwhelming." They believed that Reagan circumvented the process of public debate by using a covert operation. Therefore, the NGOs determined the peace and human rights movement needed to gather reliable votes in Congress to contain the president's ability to perpetuate the guerrilla insurgency in Nicaragua.⁶

⁶ "Coalition/Campaign Meeting," Minutes, March 18, 1982, 1-3, Acc. 91A-099, Box 8, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

CFNFP subsequently mobilized its grassroots network into action. The Coalition urged friends and member organizations to call or write Congress to insist their representative and senator support legislation that prohibited any funding of paramilitary support in Nicaragua. The Coalition further proposed that concerned citizens participate in a march in Washington scheduled for March 27, 1982, to stand against U.S. intervention in Central America and follow up that demonstration with visits or phone calls to the offices of members of Congress on March 29. Furthermore, CFNFP called on organizations to form delegations of thirty to sixty people to visit the office of members of Congress during the Easter Recess in early April or to put together town hall meetings with members of Congress. An essential part of the town hall strategy was to ask for a public pledge to oppose U.S. covert activity in Nicaragua.⁷ This tactic forced elected officials to take a public stand on the issue and allowed organizations, such as CFNFP, to then position those officials as for or against human rights.

The Coalition also wrote to members of Congress directly, arguing that the covert operation of the Reagan administration risked destabilizing Nicaragua and the rest of the region, leading to greater violence and repression. Gretchen Eick, of United Church of Christ and co-chair of CFNFP, and Donald L. Ranard, the other co-chair and the director for the Center for International Policy, wrote to senators stating that CFNFP spoke on behalf of forty-nine national organizations and their constituencies. Eick and Ranard urged the senators to oppose any intervention in

⁷ "Nicaragua and U.S. Covert Action," Legislative Update, Campaign Against U.S. Intervention (Washington, D.C.: Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, March 22, 1982), 2, Acc. 90A-113, Box 14, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

Nicaragua and to cut off funding for any paramilitary forces. They noted the irony of the administration strongly condemning terrorist organizations while supporting armed counterrevolutionaries and their operations of terrorism against the population of Nicaragua. They also emphasized the increasing danger of escalating violence in the region through a U.S.-trained paramilitary force and militarizing regional politics, all of which would only raise tensions among the Central American countries.⁸ Furthermore, the covert operation played into the hands of the Marxist and authoritarian hardliners in Managua by providing them justification for a national state of emergency that restricted the civil rights of Nicaraguans. Rather than bringing democracy and freedom to Nicaraguans, Reagan created circumstances that would further polarize a country trying to build an open pluralistic society. CFNFP then called into question the legitimacy of elected representatives allowing the operation to proceed, stating, “We urge you to oppose any form of covert aggression against Nicaragua. Nothing less than our own integrity is at stake.”⁹

The Coalition wanted to make human rights a wedge issue to separate Republicans from the president. Raising the prospect of intervention served as an effective argument to illicit fears of a new Vietnam War and remind Americans of the horrors associated with that experience. Intervention also rekindled the shame of past U.S. involvement in Latin American that resulted in violence and terror. The threat of escalating violence and destabilizing the region would be a common refrain within Congress, as would warnings against policies that pushed the Sandinistas to

⁸ Gretchen Eick and Donald L. Ranard to Senator, Letter, May 26, 1982, 1–2, Acc. 90A-113, Box 14, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁹ Gretchen Eick and Donald L. Ranard to Representative, Letter, March 29, 1982, 1–2, Acc. 91A-099, Box 7, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

acts of greater repression out of self-preservation. However, these arguments anticipated problems in Nicaragua, Central America, and U.S. policy, whereas arguments that cited abuse by the Contras would later prove more effective in the coming years in influencing the views of Contra policy in Congress.

CFNFP also organized the drafting and distribution of a statement in opposition to the covert operation signed by 118 other organizations that connected U.S. actions in Nicaragua with the human rights violations of previous U.S. interventions.¹⁰ The “Statement in Opposition to Covert Intervention in Nicaragua” (the “Statement”) compared U.S. actions in Nicaragua in 1982 to the covert operations in Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, the Dominican Republic in 1961, and Chile in 1973, all of which “served to suppress human rights, while increasing anti-American sentiment around the globe.” CFNFP continued to push Nicaragua as a wedge issue, declaring that, in 1982, the United States again was helping unsavory characters violate human rights, which tainted the United States and painted U.S. elected officials as complicit in abuses. The Statement argued that Reagan’s policy of “covert intervention against a sovereign nation fundamentally violates international law....” U.S. actions would only increase tensions in the region and pressure Nicaragua to mobilize for war while implementing domestic policies out of fear and survival, increasing Nicaragua’s distrust of the United States. Organizations that signed the Statement included the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Black American Law Students Association, the Church Coalition for Human Rights

¹⁰ Cindy M. Buhl and Susan Benda to Friend, Letter, April 7, 1982, Acc. 91A-099, Box 7, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

in the Philippines, the Episcopal Peace Fellowship, the Maryknoll Sisters, the National Lawyers Guild, the Nicaragua Network, and WOLA.¹¹

Despite the engagement and activism of organizations such as CFNFP, Congress did not share their concern for Nicaragua yet, but that changed in November after the reporting by *Newsweek*. A series of articles provided detailed accounts of the Contra operation in Nicaragua and Honduras and the planning that took place among White House officials. *Newsweek* reported that Reagan authorized the CIA to expand its covert operations started under Carter, to contact opposition forces in exile, and to support operations to interdict the trade in weapons with Salvadoran insurgents. John Negroponte, serving as U.S. ambassador to Honduras, managed the covert operation supposedly to arm, train, and direct an army of exiles from Nicaragua to obstruct the flow of arms into El Salvador. However, *Newsweek* noted that the operation also furthered efforts to subvert the Nicaraguan government. The scale of the operation far surpassed the original intentions of the administration and what administration officials reported to the intelligence committees in Congress. The CIA placed at least fifty operatives in Honduras, and Contra forces consisted of about two thousand Miskitos and ten thousand anti-Sandinistas, in addition to former members of Somoza's National Guard.¹²

The involvement of Somoza's National Guard created problems and undermined the appeal of the operation from the beginning. Originally, the plan did

¹¹ "Statement in Opposition to Covert Intervention in Nicaragua," Statement, May 1982, Acc. 90A-113, Box 14, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹² John Brecher et al., "A Secret War for Nicaragua," *Newsweek*, November 8, 1982, LexisNexis Academic.

not include direct dealing with the former National Guard members and other former Somoza supporters, but, according to *Newsweek's* reporting, Negrofonte felt pressure to produce some success, which led him to seek out the remnants of the National Guard. Bringing in the National Guard alienated people disillusioned with the Sandinistas, such as Alfonso Robelo, but who would never collaborate with the *somocistas*.¹³

The *Newsweek* reporting stunned those in Congress and around the country hearing about the Contra operation for the first time while opponents of Reagan's Contra policy jumped on the exposed vulnerability of the administration. An editorial in *The Washington Post* criticized the administration for its dangerous hypocrisy of pursuing "a ragged little war out of Honduras" while also professing a desire to negotiate a resolution to the rising tension.¹⁴ Individual members of Congress drafted a flurry of proposals to limit or shut down the Contra operation, and committees called CIA Director William Casey and other top intelligence officials to testify and explain themselves. The president refused to comment on the matter.¹⁵

CFNFP added fuel to the fire of discontent with Reagan by continuing to frame the covert operation as a violation of Nicaragua's sovereignty and self-determination. Building on its work from earlier in the year, CFNFP wrote to members of Congress seeking their support for an amendment proposed by

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "A War Against Nicaragua," *The Washington Post*, November 3, 1982, sec. Editorial, LexisNexis Academic.

¹⁵ "Remarks in an Interview with Six Journalists. March 29, 1983," in *Compilation of Presidential Documents (1983), Monday, April 4, 1983*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983).

Representatives Harkin and Jim Oberstar (D-MN) to prohibit funding for forces fighting against the Nicaraguan government. CFNFP's letter cited how the covert operation was antithetical to U.S. values and relations with other countries. It emphasized the great damage the covert operation would do to the legitimacy of opposition parties in Nicaragua and their chances to reconcile with the government. The organization rejected as irresponsible and dangerous the use of violence to achieve foreign policy objectives because it created insecurity along the border with Honduras, escalated the threat of a regional conflict, and violated U.S. law and treaty obligations, specifically obligations under the OAS Charter and the UN Charter. With the letter, CFNFP included the "Statement in Opposition to Covert Intervention in Nicaragua."¹⁶

Senator Chris Dodd (D-CT) wrote to his colleagues in December 1982, calling on Congress to prohibit any further funding of paramilitary groups in Central America until January 20, 1985, inauguration day. Dodd's position on Nicaragua emphasized CFNFP's argument regarding sovereignty and self-determination. He argued that Reagan's policy of supporting paramilitary forces in Nicaragua "belies any fundamental understanding of the social, economic and political forces at work in the region" and "signals our interest in promoting military solutions to political problems" in other countries. Reagan's actions risked demonstrating to the world that Washington would refuse to abide by international law and treaty obligations that prohibited interfering in the domestic politics of other nations in the Western

¹⁶ Nancy Sylvester and Gretchen Eick to Members of Congress, Letter, December 7, 1982, 1-2, Acc. 91A-099, Box 5, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

Hemisphere, in addition to putting the United States at odds with other democracies in Latin America, such as Mexico and Venezuela. Sovereignty and national self-determination represented a fundamental right, a human right, to people and nations accustomed to a history of intervention.¹⁷

That same day, Rep. Harkin proposed an amendment to the 1983 Defense Appropriation bill that restricted the use of funds by preventing aid from going to any group fighting against the Nicaraguan government. Harkin's amendment would have cut funding to the Contras. Writing to Diane Passmore at the CAWG, Harkin said he wanted to bring the operation against Nicaragua to an end.¹⁸ His proposal received support from a substantial number of Democrats.¹⁹ However, the amendment likely did not have enough votes for the House to pass the measure because it went further than members were ready to go, restricting the president's ability to conduct foreign policy in Nicaragua. However, lawmakers still shared Dodd's and Harkin's concern that the White House may attempt to overthrow the Sandinista government.

During the floor debate, Ed Boland (D-MA) informed Harkin and the rest of the House that, as chair of the House Intelligence Committee, Boland had already attached a secret amendment to the spending bill with language similar, but less restrictive, to Harkin's proposal that addressed classified appropriations for the CIA. Boland's amendment to the appropriations bill prohibited U.S. assistance to any

¹⁷ Christopher J. Dodd to Colleague, Letter, December 8, 1982, Legislative Relations, 1969-1996, Box 88, Robert J. Dole Archive and Special Collections.

¹⁸ Tom Harkin to Diane Passmore, Letter, December 16, 1982, Box 6, Central America Working Group Records (DG 145), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹⁹ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 303.

group for the purpose of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government or provoking a war between Nicaragua and Honduras.²⁰ When Boland made his amendment public, Harkin accepted the language in place of his own. As a result, the House never voted on Harkin's proposal. Boland intended for his amendment to preserve the sovereignty and self-determination of the Nicaraguan people while preventing the administration from again circumventing Congress.²¹ The Boland Amendment passed in the House 411 to 0.²² The Senate also approved the language from Boland on December 21, 1982.²³

With the Boland Amendment in place, Harkin expressed relief and optimism to Passmore about the future of relations with Nicaragua. Though Boland's amendment left open the possibility of U.S. support for military or paramilitary action in Nicaragua, Harkin argued that the language made clear that the American people opposed operations intended to violate Nicaraguan sovereignty. Harkin credited the success of the Boland Amendment to organizations such as the CAWG for their determined opposition to Reagan's covert paramilitary. "This is a step in the right direction and it is due, to a great extent, to people such as yourself, who have spoken out and protested the policies of the Reagan Administration in Central America." He also hoped that the determined opposition demonstrated political risks for administration officials should they continue down the same path of intervention in Nicaragua.²⁴

²⁰ Harkin to Passmore, Letter, December 16, 1982.

²¹ Bernard Weinraub, "Congress Renews Curbs on Actions Against Nicaragua," *The New York Times*, December 22, 1982, sec. A, LexisNexis Academic.

²² "House Votes to Bar U.S. Help to Rebels Fighting Nicaragua," *The New York Times*, December 8, 1982, sec. A, LexisNexis Academic.

²³ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 304.

²⁴ Harkin to Passmore, Letter, December 16, 1982.

Despite Harkin's optimism, the Boland Amendment contained crucial deficiencies that rendered the restrictions nearly meaningless. The Nicaragua Network explained the problems to its members in early 1983 to let them know that the struggle against the Contras lived on. The Boland Amendment only prohibited funding for military and paramilitary activities in Nicaragua to overthrow the Nicaraguan government or start a war between Nicaragua and Honduras. The restriction depended on intent. The administration could, and did, easily sidestep this language and argue that the United States did not fund the Contras to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. However, the amendment did not address the intentions of the Contras, and Congress could not control how the Contras used the funding, advice, or training once received from the United States.²⁵ The Boland Amendment did establish a legal and political precedent for challenging Reagan's support of the guerrilla forces in Nicaragua, but it also forced the administration to articulate other reasons for supporting the Contras.

2. Early Human Rights Opposition to the Contras

NGOs dominated the conversation over Nicaragua policy and used human rights arguments to contest Reagan's Contra operation while encouraging Congress to do the same. In the early part of 1982 through 1983, NGOs strengthened organizational structures and strategies of advocacy for human rights and peace while encouraging Congress to rein in Reagan's ability to wage covert war. Much of

²⁵ "Legislative Action Alert: Ending the U.S. Covert Action Against Nicaragua" (National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People, April 1983), Nicaragua Network Records, Box 5, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Congress agreed with the president that the Sandinistas posed a potential threat to democracy and regional stability, but lawmakers also grew concerned about the efficacy of supporting a counterrevolutionary force to undermine the Nicaraguan government. This concern over the consequences of U.S. policy related back to the anti-Contra arguments of NGOs and those of Senator Dodd, to the effect that U.S. funding of a paramilitary force represented a new form of U.S. intervention in Latin America and would only increase the violence and terror waged against civilian populations. Intervention also violated the collective right of national sovereignty and self-determination as the Sandinistas implemented policies to protect the rights of their citizens.

The Nicaragua Network explained that the Sandinistas' handling of indigenous groups on the Atlantic Coast came from the intention to improve life in Nicaragua for all. The Nicaragua Network turned the Miskito relocation issue on its head and presented the Sandinista policies as serving human rights.²⁶ In the summer of 1983, when it brought a delegation of Miskito Indians to the United States, the Nicaragua Network referred to the relocation as “[t]he most creative project designed to aid the economic reconstruction of the region, as well as provide for health and social programs, and, to provide for the security and protection of the Miskitus....”²⁷ The Sandinistas implemented economic reforms in the Atlantic Coast region as part

²⁶ “Implementation Committee Meeting” (Washington, D.C.: National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People, March 28, 1982), 1–3, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 2, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁷ “Miskitu Indian Delegation From Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast” (National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People, June 1983), 4, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 6, Wisconsin Historical Society.

of the larger initiative of the revolution to bring economic opportunity and social equality to the country.

The organization claimed that the Sandinistas undertook economic programs in the Atlantic Coast region after the victory over Somoza to address poverty, malnutrition, and unemployment. The Nicaragua Network found that decades of exploitation at the hands of the Somoza government and foreign corporations left the region in desperate shape. The Sandinista government initiated programs to create growth in industry and programs for land redistribution to stimulate more farming and expand the cattle industry. The Sandinistas also carried out the literacy campaign immediately after the victory over Somoza in three languages of the Atlantic Coast region (English, Miskitu, and Sumu) to address the needs of a wide swath of people. The government also established primary health care services and began building a hospital.²⁸

CFNFP, meanwhile, contrasted life in Nicaragua with that in El Salvador and Guatemala, nations the United States considered allies in the region and provided with economic and military aid. The Coalition produced a talking points memo to distribute to grassroots activists and coalition organizations that responded to Reagan's statements about Central America. CFNFP disputed Reagan's claim that Nicaragua had the worst record on human rights in Central America. Nicaragua committed twenty extrajudicial killings in the previous three years, comparatively little next to the 2,630 executions by the military in El Salvador in 1982 and the Guatemalan Justice and Peace Committee killing 8,576 of its citizens. CFNFP also

²⁸ Ibid., 1-4.

cited an AW report that found that the torture so prevalent under Somoza had virtually disappeared under the Sandinistas.²⁹

The Coalition also addressed the economic and social rights of Nicaraguans as recognized under the Sandinista regime. CFNFP found that the Nicaraguan government implemented agrarian reform to redistribute the land so as to grant more Nicaraguans the ability and opportunity to provide for themselves and their families, what individuals in developing nations considered a fundamental right. The government also made credit more available for both large land owners and poor peasants, which further addressed the issues of equality and economic opportunity. The Coalition refuted claims of a Marxist-Leninist takeover of the Nicaraguan state, arguing that 75 percent of Nicaraguan industry and agriculture remained privately owned. CFNFP also cited advances in health care, as evidenced by the selection of Nicaragua in April 1983 by the World Health Organization and the Pan-American Health Organization as a “model health program” to receive additional funding for new projects in health care.³⁰

CFNFP cited reports from 1982 by AW and the OAS that criticized the Sandinistas for the treatment of indigenous groups along the Atlantic Coast, particularly the relocation of the Miskitos, which resulted in isolated killings by state forces. However, these reports rejected charges by the Reagan administration that genocide took place or that the government implemented a policy of terror against the Miskitos. These actions differed from those in Guatemala, where AI found that

²⁹ “‘Talking Points’ For the President’s Address on Central America, Wednesday, April 27” (Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, April 1983), 3, Acc. 90A-113, Box 15, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

the military killed some two thousand six hundred indigenous people in 1982 alone. CFNFP also cited criticism from the Nicaraguan Catholic Bishops against the policy of relocation for the hardships it caused and lack of notice given to those moved, but the Bishops “did not question that the relocations were a military necessity given the dangers of the border conflict.”³¹

AW formed in 1982 out of the human rights-focused NGO Helsinki Watch, to promote human rights in Latin America, but it limited its focus to political and civil rights. The organization credited Jeane Kirkpatrick with prompting its formation when she argued that U.S. policy should distinguish between totalitarian nations and friendly authoritarian ones, vowing to monitor and report on the human rights violations committed by authoritarian regimes. AW put great emphasis on balanced reporting, claiming that human rights abuse should be reported and addressed without distinction for friend or foe, or based on the form of government, a stance that would lend its reports a high level of credibility throughout the Contra War.³²

Similarly, AI took great caution in maintaining a reputation for balanced and impartial human rights reporting, which earned the respect of progressive NGOs and government officials in the White House and Congress. Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, acknowledged before Congress that he relied on AI’s reports for accurate information about torture and

³¹ Ibid., 3.

³² “Americas Watch Report: The First Year June 1981-June 1982” (New York: Americas Watch, 1982), 1–2, Box 289, Folder: Americas Watch First Year Report 1982, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

that his agency met with its representatives to discuss the reports.³³ AI referred to itself as an international organization independent of any government. It maintained strict rules for working with other NGOs so that it could maintain its reputation for independence and impartiality.³⁴ AI also declined to comment on personnel matters with respect to human rights agencies or officials and did not take positions on issues related to governmental or inter-governmental agencies defending human rights and standards used for determining human rights abuses.³⁵ AI concluded that its effectiveness as an advocate for human rights came from its credibility, which it maintained through “accurate research, working methods, financial independence, public statements, publicity campaigns and so forth.”³⁶ AI focused on the release of men and women wrongfully held in prisons and on fair and timely trials of political prisoners held by governments. It advocated against torture and the cruel or inhumane punishment of all prisoners. Finally, AI claimed, in furtherance of its work on behalf of prisoners, to work more broadly for the defense of human rights “in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural spheres.”³⁷

³³ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Practice of Torture by Foreign Governments and U.S. Efforts to Oppose Its Use: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 98th Cong., 2nd sess., 1984, 5.

³⁴ Secretary General’s Office to All National Sections, “Cooperation with Other Non-Governmental Organizations,” Memorandum, October 18, 1979, 1, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc.: National Office Records, Box II.2 7, Nongovernmental Organizations - Cooperation with other Non-Governmental Organizations 18 Oct 1979, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

³⁵ Secretary General to All National Sections, “Current Issues,” Memorandum, February 23, 1982, 2–3, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc.: National Office Records, Box I.1 3, 7-8 March 1981, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁷ “Report of the Amnesty International Missions to the Republic of Nicaragua; August 1979, January 1980 and August 1980: Including Memoranda Exchanged Between the Government and Amnesty International” (London, UK: Amnesty International, June 1982).

Many members of Congress from both parties expressed frustration over Reagan's policy toward Nicaragua for exacerbating conditions destructive to human rights, and they adapted the language of human rights advocacy to their principled opposition. In an address on the floor of the House in May 1983, Rep. Bill Alexander (D-AR) noted that Reagan seemed to misunderstand the purpose of his own policy and conflate communism with the true sources of instability and revolution in the region. One day, Reagan would deliver a thoughtful speech declaring that his Nicaragua policy stopped the flow of arms to El Salvador. On another day, he would proclaim the righteous cause of the freedom fighters who sought to overthrow the Sandinista government. Alexander further argued that Reagan failed to understand the real issues in Nicaragua, which did not stem from communism. Nicaragua's problems were "economic, social, and political – in that order of importance. Nobody but us Gringos appears to believe in the strategy of suppressing discontent by force of arms. Nobody, that is, but the regimes which have demonstrated an incapacity to maintain order in their own countries without foreign assistance and weapons at the ready." Alexander explained that in the absence of equal social and economic opportunity, equal access to resources and land, and critical social goods such as access to health care, the resulting instability and discontent in the eyes of Nicaraguans rendered voting rights and free speech meaningless.³⁸

Elected officials wanted the United States to stand strong against communism while upholding high moral ideals in domestic and foreign policy. Supporting the Contras risked sacrificing the latter for the former. In that regard, the Contra War

³⁸ Rep. Bill Alexander, 98th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 129 (May 11, 1983): H2850-2851.

threatened human rights through the conduct of Contra forces led by the former National Guard, but officials also feared that the counterrevolutionary forces would push the Sandinistas toward greater levels of repression against the Nicaraguan people. In a hearing over the appropriate direction of U.S. foreign policy for Central America, Gerald Solomon (R-NY) followed the typical line of Cold Warriors in Washington. Solomon declared that “the spread of international communism through Soviet imperialism represents the single gravest and most systematic threat to human rights imaginable, not only in Central America, but around the globe.”³⁹ Chairman of the Human Rights and International Organizations Committee Gus Yatron (D-PA) would not disagree with his colleague and reminded those present that he was no friend of the Sandinista government. However, Yatron also rejected the policies of Reagan in supporting guerrillas in Nicaragua that would lead to further repression by the Sandinistas. Yatron argued that “U.S. national interests are paramount, yet these interests have been, and will always be, founded on our Nation’s commitment to uphold the human rights of all peoples.”⁴⁰ Yatron would not sacrifice core U.S. principles of upholding peace, seeking democracy, and protecting human rights simply to undermine an authoritarian government, albeit one trending toward communism.

Ranking Republican member of the Human Rights Committee Jim Leach (R-IA) agreed with Yatron that the United States should not purposefully pursue

³⁹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittees on Human Rights and International Organizations and on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, *U.S. Policy in Central America: Hearings Before the Subcommittees on Human Rights and International Organizations and on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 98th Cong., 1st sess., 1983, 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

policies that would result in more violations of human rights. Leach argued that the United States held some blame for human rights violations in Nicaragua because the Sandinista government responded to the counterrevolutionary forces and their actions through greater levels of repression in the interest of self-preservation.⁴¹ “The only reason I raise this,” stated Leach, “is to put it into perspective and to make it very clear that from a human rights perspective we play a very dangerous role and we play by the same rules as the other side.”⁴² The consequences of U.S. support for the Contras seemed certain to lead to terrible results for the people of Nicaragua, whether at the hands of the Contras or the Nicaraguan government. Yet, the administration planned for those results, as earlier intelligence assessments revealed, and those results made up the human rights strategy of the administration.

The Nicaragua Network, WOLA, and CFNFP supported efforts by members of Congress to legislate limits on Reagan’s covert action. A proposal by Representative Michael D. Barnes (D-MD) to cut off all aid to the Contras or other groups engaged in attacks on the Nicaraguan government received strong, coordinated support from anti-Contra organizations. The House Intelligence Committee, responsible for the CIA’s budget, heard the proposal jointly with the Western Hemisphere Affairs subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, so NGOs turned their lobbying efforts on members of those committees. The Nicaragua Network urged its members to contact lawmakers and ask them to oppose Contra aid and the U.S. mission to destabilize the Nicaragua government, to co-sponsor the Barnes legislation, to contact Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill (D-MA)

⁴¹ Ibid., 4.

⁴² Ibid., 5.

and Ed Boland and voice their opposition to the Contras, and to speak out on the record against Contra aid. And the organization wanted the same treatment given to the Senate.⁴³ The subcommittee did pass the measure, but more as symbolism since it had little chance of passing the full House, much less the Republican-controlled Senate.⁴⁴ The Barnes proposal did not find its way into law but did give voice to the growing dissent from lawmakers and NGOs opposed to Contra support.

Defeat of the Barnes proposal notwithstanding, members of Congress wanted assurances that the Reagan administration abided by domestic and international law with regard to its Nicaragua policy. Sixty-five members of the House wrote to Boland to express their “support for efforts to guarantee that the United States does not violate the law by providing assistance to military and para-military groups seeking to initiate armed action against the people and territory of Nicaragua.” They appreciated Boland’s previous efforts to reign in the administration’s covert operations in Nicaragua, and they called for even stronger efforts to limit U.S. involvement with the Contras. Lawmakers cited statements by the Nicaraguan opposition groups stating their intention to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. They argued that the administration’s association with the Contras violated the letter and the spirit of the Boland Amendment in addition to the United Nations Charter and treaty obligations with the OAS. Moreover, undermining the Nicaraguan government produced real, dangerous consequences for the people of Nicaragua by

⁴³ Diane L. Passmore to NNSNP Committees and Key Contacts, Memorandum, April 7, 1983, 3–4, Box 4, Central America Working Group Records (DG 145), Swarthmore College Peace Collection; “Legislative Action Alert: Ending the U.S. Covert Action Against Nicaragua.”

⁴⁴ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Assistance Legislation for Fiscal Years 1984-85 (Part 7): Hearings before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 98th Cong., 1st sess., 1983, xvii.

hardening Nicaraguan animosity towards the United States and escalating a civil war. The Reagan administration risked igniting a war that would kill thousands in Nicaragua and possibly elsewhere in Central America. The groups of lawmakers requested that Boland lead an effort to bring Nicaragua policy to a full debate on the House floor and to draft legislation to again prevent U.S. support for groups seeking to overthrow the Nicaraguan government.⁴⁵ Boland would follow through on this request and lead an effort for the next two years that eventually strengthened his amendment to prevent Reagan from carrying out his Contra operation to the extent the administration desired.

3. Human Rights and the Contra War in Nicaraguan Rhetoric

A history of intervention by the United States influenced how Nicaraguans responded to the counterrevolutionary guerrilla forces and the reports of Washington's involvement. Sandinista officials and Nicaraguan religious leaders pointed to Reagan's support of the Contras as one more example of a century of U.S. imperialism and exploitation and exposed Washington's ignorance of the reforms instituted by the Sandinistas. However, other groups within Nicaragua rejected both extremes of the Contra War. They spurned the presence of guerrilla forces funded by the United States as a violation of self-determination, yet they also believed the Sandinistas stood in the way of human rights and democracy.

The Nicaraguan people suffered from attacks by the Contras well before *Newsweek* broke the story for readers in the United States. The Nicaraguan

⁴⁵ Sixty-Five Members of Congress to Edward P. Boland, Letter, April 22, 1983, Box 8, Dave McCurdy Collection, 1981-1996, Carl Albert Center Archives.

government had alerted the world to U.S. involvement with the guerrillas through public pleas to support peace. The Sandinista government teamed up with religious groups to communicate the plight faced by Nicaraguans and the extent to which the Nicaragua government defended the rights and safety of the Nicaragua people. The Permanent Mission of Nicaragua to the United Nations issued a letter from Bishop John Wilson of the Moravian Church, one of the larger religious denominations of indigenous groups along the Atlantic Coast, and Sixto Ulloa, director of international relations of the Evangelical Committee for Development Assistance (CEPAD), in which they responded to charges of abuse by the Sandinista government. They disputed the characterizations of the Nicaraguan government as forcing the Miskitos to relocate from the Coco River and burning villages for punitive reasons. Wilson and Ulloa claimed that the state effected the relocation out a concern for the safety of those living in the region after the recent cross-border attacks by the Contras. The Nicaraguan military burned the villages as part of a scorched earth strategy to reduce resources available to the insurgent forces. The Nicaraguan government admitted it made mistakes and worked with community and church leaders to resolve the problems to make a better Nicaragua going forward. The specter of a U.S. invasion made it even more difficult to resolve the conflicts in Nicaragua peacefully, they argued.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ “Letter Addressed by Bishop John Wilson of the Moravian Church of Nicaragua and Mr. Sixto Ulloa, Director of International Relations of CEPAD (Evangelical Committee for Development Assistance) to the Editor of the New York Times,” Press Release (Republic of Nicaragua, Permanent Mission to the United Nations, March 11, 1982), 1–2, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society.

In March 1982, CEPAD issued another statement appealing directly to the people of the United States as moral Christians. CEPAD spoke to those in “the church of God which is in the United States, to all who are called to be God’s Holy People, who belong to him in union with Jesus, together with all people everywhere who worship our Lord Jesus Christ....” CEPAD explained that the suspension of economic and material aid from the United States left Nicaragua with limited food. The U.S. government prevented Nicaragua from obtaining loans from the World Bank for infrastructure projects to rebuild the country after the devastation of war with the Somoza government. CEPAD also claimed that Somoza drained the country’s treasury and ruined its economy, leaving the Nicaraguan people poor and in need of basic necessities. The Sandinistas implemented programs to provide food and water, housing, and health care.⁴⁷ As it formed a government and established its operating principles, the Junta wrote of these same social services as human rights that the state had an obligation to ensure for its people.

CEPAD expressed anguish that the U.S. government would support groups waging war against the Nicaraguan government as it tried to provide life-saving services and resources to the people. It also expressed concern with the administration’s apparent reliance on advice from the militant, neoconservative group the Santa Fe Committee that declared war, not peace, was the normal state of international relations. CEPAD appealed to the United States as a Christian people, who sought peace in Christ, to stop the war and end the suffering. “We are sure that a

⁴⁷ CEPAD, “Pastoral Letter of the General Assembly to: The Christian Churches of the United States, the People of the United States, and All People of Good Will,” Press Release (Republic of Nicaragua, Permanent Mission to the United Nations, March 16, 1982), Nicaragua Network Records, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Nation where a high percentage of the people are committed to Christ and which maintains that it has been bred [*sic*] upon Christian principals [*sic*] will want to conduct its actions according to [the] Lord's designs and in the promotion of life, justice and peace." The letter was signed by representatives of the Moravian Church, the Association of Baptist Pentecostal Churches, the Episcopal Church, the Nicaraguan Baptist Convention, and the Central American Evangelical Churches Convention.⁴⁸

Also writing to the people of the United States, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Nicaraguan government called on Americans to reject the actions of the Reagan administration as antithetical to U.S. values. The open letter referenced a March 14, 1983, terrorist attack that blew up a bridge over the Negro River close to the Nicaragua-Honduras border. The Ministry connected the bombing with the secret Contra operation, as reported by *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, and pleaded with the people of the United States to stand against the Reagan administration's policies. Reagan's actions contradicted "the desires for peace of the American people who conscientiously oppose the participation of the Government in such criminal and covert actions." The Sandinistas ominously warned that actions of sabotage and violence such as these would force legal measures to protect the security of the Nicaraguan government and its people.⁴⁹ These measures would include declaring national states of emergency that empowered the government to restrict civil liberties.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "Government of Nicaragua Denounces Terrorist Acts From Counterrevolutionaries in Nicaraguan Territory," Press Release (Republic of Nicaragua, Permanent Mission to the United Nations, March 15, 1982), Nicaragua Network Records, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Sandinista officials also addressed the threat U.S. policy posed to the safety and stability of the country and region, making arguments like those of U.S. NGOs and Democrats in Congress. Officials accused the United States of fomenting civil war and regional conflict, of reengaging the hated National Guard in operations of violence and destruction against the Nicaraguan people, and of fighting an undeclared war of imperialism.⁵⁰ The Nicaraguan legislature appealed to the international community for help finding a peaceful resolution to the escalating conflict. The Council of State declared on March 28, 1983, that “[i]t is no longer a secret to anyone that the United States Government finances, arms and trains somocista ex-national guards who, supported by sectors of the army and Government of Honduras, have increased their actions of terror and death against our people.”⁵¹ The Nicaraguan legislature warned that the situation created by the United States risked enflaming military conflict between Nicaragua and Honduras or creating a regional conflagration. It urged leaders and governments throughout the world to assist the Nicaraguan people in pushing forward a peaceful resolution for Central America. The Council of State spoke directly to the U.S. Congress in explicit human rights terms, stating that, with the international community “committed to the... right of people to their self-determination, we call on the Congress of the United States to join these efforts for peace in Central America.” The Nicaraguans requested that

⁵⁰ “Communique Issued by the National Leadership of the Sandinista National Liberation Front” (Managua, Nicaragua, April 8, 1983), 1–3, Box 1, Central America Working Group Records (DG 145), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁵¹ Carlos Nunez Tellez, “Declaration of the Council of State,” Press Release (Washington, D.C.: Nicaraguan Embassy, April 4, 1983), 1, Box 1, Central America Working Group Records (DG 145), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

Congress support the forces for peace and reject the forces of war in Central America.⁵²

Managua legitimized its own actions during the conflict as necessary responses to the Contra threat and a defense of human rights for Nicaraguans. The state used violence only in self-defense and sought a diplomatic resolution to the conflicts, but the Sandinistas would only agree to peace terms that included the withdrawal of the Contras. They claimed the United States attacked

because we have made a revolution, because we are fighting successfully against poverty and backwardness, because we are distributing free land to peasants, because we have regained control over our natural resources, because we have successfully fought illiteracy, because we stand in solidarity with our brother peoples of Latin America and the world.... They attack us because we have won a prestigious place in the world due to our respect for human rights. The United States is attacking because they were always accustomed to having faithful servants as rulers in Nicaragua and because the leaders of today's revolutionary fully uphold the Nicaraguan people's heroic anti-imperialist spirit.⁵³

It further addressed the need to mobilize all the resources of the country in defense against the United States, "even if this involves greater difficulties in carrying out our economic programs and greater limitations in terms of the availability of material resources for distribution in the country." Yet, the Sandinistas assured the Nicaraguan people and the world that Nicaraguans would find a way to prevail while bearing what hardships came their way.

According to the Sandinistas, the primary obstacle to Nicaraguan prosperity and freedom had always been "*imperialismo yanqui*" (Yankee imperialism), through

⁵² Ibid., 2.

⁵³ "Communique Issued by the National Leadership of the Sandinista National Liberation Front," 4.

which the Nicaraguan people had their most basic rights taken and liberty denied. Throughout the country's history, the Nicaraguan people suffered from corruption, terrorism, repression, and foreign domination by the United States.⁵⁴ Bayardo Arce Castaño, vice-coordinator in the Executive Committee of the FSLN's National Directorate, argued that the conflict then facing Nicaragua symbolized a larger international crisis created by Washington's most recent global drive for political and economic dominance. Arce declared not the Soviet Union or Cuba but the United States the threat to international peace and human rights.⁵⁵ Developing nations throughout the world, including Nicaragua, suffered from economic and social injustice created from exploitation by the few "industrialized countries."⁵⁶ Genuine or not, the Sandinistas framed the conflict within the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse.

The National Directorate called the Contras "genocidal forces" conducting an invasion funded and encouraged by the United States. Furthermore, the FSLN called the war a "criminal" plan against both the Nicaraguan people and any other government that showed respect toward the Nicaraguan state. Managua pledged that it would devote all available resources to defeating the Contras while equitably managing the distribution of resources. Even in the face of an existential threat, the Sandinistas assured Nicaragua that they would continue pursuing a foreign policy of non-alignment, a message to the world that the Sandinistas did not consider

⁵⁴ "Bases Para El Plan de Lucha Del FSLN" (Managua, Nicaragua, 1984), 2, 19, Vertical File, Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica.

⁵⁵ Bayardo Arce Castaño, *Sandinismo y Política Imperialista* (Managua, Nicaragua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1985), 14–19, Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica..

⁵⁶ Daniel Ortega, "Las Reglas Del Juego Las Dicta El Pueblo," in *Habla La Vanguardia* (Managua, Nicaragua, 1983), 22–27, Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica..

themselves part of the Soviet sphere and a necessary component of Nicaraguan sovereignty and self-determination. Furthermore, the FSLN pledged to continue policies of a mixed economy and political pluralism and to hold elections in 1985.⁵⁷

The Sandinistas stressed the importance of continuing to consolidate power and strengthen Nicaraguan society. The Contras attacked to spread terror, confusion, and instability among the Nicaraguan people because the Contras could not defeat the Nicaraguan military in battle. According to Ortega, the real danger came from the disunion and fear among the Nicaraguan people and dissent toward their government. Ortega used teachers as an example. He accused the counterrevolutionary forces of targeting teachers for assassination to defeat the literacy campaign, but the teachers returned and continued fulfilling the objectives of the revolution and defending the Nicaraguan state. Ortega declared that Nicaraguans could defeat U.S. aggression by constructing a strong, stable society and national defense that demonstrated to U.S. officials the futility and danger of further intervention.⁵⁸

The measures taken by the Sandinistas to restrict civil liberties and to prepare the Nicaraguan people for war disturbed even liberal members of Congress who typically opposed Reagan's support of the Contras. Twelve members of the House, including Michael D. Barnes, Jim Wright (D-TX), Clement J. Zablocki (D-WI),

⁵⁷ "Todos a la Defensa de la Patria" (Managua, Nicaragua, April 8, 1983), 1-5, Vertical File, Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica.

⁵⁸ Daniel Ortega, "Discurso del Comandante Daniel Ortega, Miembro de la Direccion Nacional del F.S.L.N. y de la Junta de Gobierno de Reconstruccion Nacional, Fijando la Posición de Nicaragua Frente a la Lucha del Pueblo Salvadoreño y el Peligro de Intervencion en Centroamerica," in *No a la Intervencion!: No la Deseamos Pero no la Tememos* (Managua, Nicaragua: Divulgación y Prensa de la Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional, 1981), 3-6, Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica.

chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Stephen J. Solarz (D-NY), Bill Alexander, Jim Leach, and Gus Yatron, expressed their “alarm” over human rights conditions in Nicaragua. In a letter to Daniel Ortega, the U.S. lawmakers placed the blame on the Sandinistas for the fighting, warning that Nicaragua risked expanding the conflict into a region-wide war. The lawmakers also noted the “conspicuous Cuban presence” in Nicaragua. They accused the Sandinistas of “serious human rights violations...” and an “absence of democratic rights and of movement toward the institutions of a truly democratic system.” They called on the Sandinistas to pursue negotiations with the “democratic opposition both inside and outside of Nicaragua with a view to seeking a political solution which would arrest the trend toward civil war, repression, and Cuban domination.”⁵⁹

Nicaraguan officials denied the allegations in this letter and other accusations of human rights violations and totalitarianism from the Reagan administration. Nicaraguan ambassador Antonio Jarquín reminded Congress that Ortega had agreed to engage in multilateral negotiations. Ortega had proposed that all nations end arms transfers to El Salvador, sought an end to aggression between Nicaragua and Honduras, and called for a termination of foreign military assistance to Central America. He also proposed that no foreign military bases be built in Central American nations. Jarquín reminded Americans that Nicaragua had already suffered extreme destruction and loss of life. His country would rather resolve the conflict peacefully, but the Reagan administration refused to negotiate.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Human Rights in Nicaragua*, 98th Cong., 1st sess., 1983, 3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-13.

In his own letter to the twelve members of Congress, Ortega pointed out that numerous human rights organizations, such as AI, the International Commission on Jurists, AW, the International Red Cross, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the OAS had visited and affirmed that the policies of the Nicaraguan government protected the human rights of the Nicaraguan people. He also argued that the FSLN supported democracy. The Junta declared that elections would be held in 1985, and eleven political parties were active in Nicaraguan politics, all of which had the right to express opposition to the government.⁶¹ The Nicaraguan government remained open to dialogue through lawful channels with any opposition party inside or outside Nicaragua.

The democratic opposition groups referred to in the letter from Barnes, Leach, and others likely included the Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática (ARDE), which accused the Sandinistas of abandoning the promises of the revolution and establishing a totalitarian state. ARDE also rejected Reagan's funding of the Contras on human rights grounds. It consisted of the Frente Revolucionario Sandino under the leadership of Edén Pastora; Unidad Sandinista de Miskitos, the indigenous coalition organization MISURASATA, led by Brooklyn Rivera; Movimiento Democrático Nicaragüense, led by Alfonso Robelo; and Frente Solidaridad Demócrata Cristiano, led by José Dávila.⁶² This coalition of opposition groups claimed that it formed ARDE to promote pluralism sought through the revolution, which included implementing a mixed economy, adopting agrarian reform, holding

⁶¹ Ibid., 13-14.

⁶² Edén Pastora et al., "Asamblea Democrática de ARDE" November 7, 1983, Alfonso Robelo C. papers, Box 1, Hoover Institution Archives.

free elections, and defending human rights.⁶³ They stood for the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse, as the Sandinistas claimed to, but ARDE disputed whether the Sandinistas genuinely pursued human rights. ARDE wanted to guarantee free elections, but the Sandinistas had been reluctant to move to elections so quickly.⁶⁴

While it opposed the Sandinistas, ARDE accused the Contra group and principal recipient of U.S. funds, the Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (FDN), of violating human rights. In July 1983, ARDE publicly denounced FDN as a successor to the hated National Guard, which ARDE condemned as an enemy of the state for its corruption and crimes against the Nicaraguan people. ARDE argued that FDN did not represent the interests of the Nicaraguan people, did not seek to establish a democracy, and only sought to reinstitute a government by military rule.⁶⁵ ARDE leadership further accused FDN of operating as an arm of a foreign power to bring back a pro-U.S. military government similar to that of the Somoza regime. The organization declared that the presence of either U.S. or Soviet military personnel undermined efforts to achieve peace through democratic and diplomatic means.⁶⁶ In 1984, ARDE issued its own proposal for peace, calling for an alliance against

⁶³ Alfonso Robelo, Brooklyn Rivera, and Edén Pastora, “Postulados Para El Rescate Democrático de la Revolución Nicaragüense” (Nicaragua, May 18, 1983), Alfonso Robelo C. papers, Box 1, Hoover Institution Archives.

⁶⁴ “Asamblea de ARDE Reitera Mandato para Búsqueda Inmediata de la Convergencia Nacional Con Otras Fuerzas Nicaragüenses Anti-Totalitarias” (Managua, June 1984), 1–2, Alfonso Robelo C. papers, box 1, Hoover Institution Archives.

⁶⁵ Alfonso Robelo, Brooklyn Rivera, and Edén Pastora, “Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática (‘ARDE’) Establece Su Posición Con Respecto a las Demos Organizaciones Nicaragüenses, y en Especial a Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (F.D.N.)” (Nicaragua, July 13, 1983), Alfonso Robelo C. papers, Box 1, Hoover Institution Archives.

⁶⁶ Alfonso Robelo, Brooklyn Rivera, and Edén Pastora, Announcement (Announcement, August 3, 1983), Alfonso Robelo C. papers, Box 1, Hoover Institution Archives.

Sandinista totalitarianism. ARDE declared that it sought to apply true pluralism, as promised by the FSLN.⁶⁷

4. A Human Rights Defense for the Contras

The administration was on its heels in early 1983 as it tried to maintain support for its Contra operation. Information about the supposedly secret plan to fund paramilitary forces leaked to the public. Human rights-based advocacy from Congress and NGOs in the United States and from the Sandinistas and anti-Sandinista groups in Nicaragua challenged the legitimacy of U.S. support for the Contras. Congress started holding hearings and asking more questions about CIA actions in Central America, about the relationship between the United States and the Contras, and about what the administration hoped to accomplish in Nicaragua. The intensity of human rights arguments, coupled with the restrictions of the Boland Amendment, left the administration looking for more palatable language, other than anti-communism, to make its case on Nicaragua policy. The administration saw public opinion siding against its Nicaragua policy. In July 1983, only 33 percent of the American people approved of Reagan's handling of Nicaragua.⁶⁸ He believed that, if only the administration could properly educate the public on his goals, the people would support him.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ "Asamblea de ARDE Reitera Mandato para Busqueda Inmediata de la Convergencia Nacional Con Otras Fuerzas Nicaraguenses Anti-Totalitarias," 1.

⁶⁸ "ABC News/Washington Post Poll, July 1983" July 1983, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, ropercenter.cornell.edu.

⁶⁹ "The President's News Conference of July 26, 1983," in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (1983), Monday, August 1, 1983*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 1052.

The president initially did not want to comment on the matter of covert support of counterrevolutionaries in Nicaragua. His go-to line when questioned about the Contras was to declare intelligence matters off limits for public comment while deflecting attention to the conduct of the Sandinistas. Reagan would rather discuss how the Sandinistas supported the guerrilla insurgents in El Salvador, and he dismissed questions about U.S. support of guerrillas in Nicaragua.⁷⁰ In April 1983, when pressed by reporters, Reagan declared that the administration complied with the Boland Amendment, but he still would not confirm whether the United States armed the Contras. On this occasion, Reagan referred the press to the Sandinistas pushing out their revolutionary partners after taking power from Somoza. He added that “anything that we’re doing in that area is simply trying to interdict the supply lines which are supplying the guerrillas in El Salvador.”⁷¹ Reagan dismissed suggestions from a reporter that the administration violated the Boland Amendment and minimized Boland’s accusations that he had evidence of the administration violating the Boland Amendment. Reagan referred to the assurances of Senator Barry Goldwater (R-AZ), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, who declared himself in a Senate floor debate “absolutely positive that there is no violation of the law whatsoever” with regard to Reagan’s Nicaragua policy and the Contras. The president explained that, once Boland and other members of Congress studied the matter more closely, they would agree that the administration followed the law. Reagan also confirmed that the United States did not do anything to

⁷⁰ “Remarks in an Interview with Six Journalists. March 29, 1983,” 473.

⁷¹ “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Reporters on Domestic and Foreign Policy Issues. April 14, 1983,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 539.

overthrow the government of Nicaragua.⁷² However, two weeks later, he acknowledged that the Contras could still declare their intention to overthrow the Nicaraguan government and that the administration would do nothing to change that.⁷³

By May 4, 1983, a day after a House committee voted to cut off all covert funding to counterrevolutionary groups in Nicaragua, Reagan did acknowledge that those groups received covert aid from the United States because they fought for the rights of Nicaraguans. The president explained that the Contras received covert aid because overt aid went to governments. He also first referred to the Contras as “freedom fighters,” which led to questions about whether the intention of the administration was really weapons interdiction or overthrowing the Nicaraguan government. Reagan quickly backtracked on his use of the “freedom fighters” term, simply wanting to use a term other than guerrillas, but he argued that these groups did fight for freedom and for the promises and principles of human rights betrayed by the Sandinistas.⁷⁴ As reports of CIA involvement with the Nicaraguan guerrilla forces continued to surface throughout 1983, Reagan also began speaking of the Contras and Nicaragua policy in more specific human rights terms.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the administration created the White House Outreach Group and the Office of Public Diplomacy in 1983 to mold the message. The White House wanted to turn the

⁷² “Remarks in an Interview with Six Journalists. March 29, 1983,” 540.

⁷³ “Interview with USA Today. April 26, 1983,” in *Compilation of Presidential Documents (1983), Monday, May 2, 1983*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 536.

⁷⁴ “Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters on Domestic and Foreign Policy Issues. May 4, 1983,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 638-642.

⁷⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 105; David P. Forsythe, *Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy: Congress Reconsidered* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1988), 92.

media's focus away from the covert and paramilitary nature of the Contra War and toward the threat communism posed to human rights.⁷⁶

Engaging in a Central America peace process gave the administration another opportunity to respond to attacks on its Nicaragua policy with human rights arguments. To ease the anger in Congress and placate public outcry over the secret paramilitary operation, the administration professed a desire for a diplomatic resolution to the conflict with the Sandinistas. The White House also communicated its intention to deescalate regional tensions made worse by the U.S.-Nicaragua row and the Salvadoran civil war. Demands for the administration to seriously pursue peace served as a common rallying cry among NGOs to muster support from progressive members of Congress.⁷⁷ By showing enthusiasm for the peace process, the administration could co-opt the peace and human rights issues to improve the appearance of its foreign policy while undercutting opposition arguments that U.S. policy did not serve human rights or that Reagan was just out for war with Nicaragua. As was often the case with human rights arguments and the Contra War, perception was everything. The administration negotiated peace not with the intent of achieving an agreement, but as part of a strategy to achieve other objectives. A diplomatic resolution might have cut short efforts by the United States to pursue its larger strategic objectives of reducing the influence of Soviet communism.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Peace, *A Call to Conscience*, 30–36.

⁷⁷ Diane Passmore to Friend, Letter, January 6, 1983, Box 4, Central America Working Group Records (DG 145), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁷⁸ “Central America Review,” Talking Points (U.S. National Security Council, February 17, 1983), 3–7, Accession number: EL01367, Digital National Security Archive.

In January 1983, Secretary of State George Shultz first proposed opening peace negotiations with Managua. Shultz argued that U.S. participation in the peace process could address several issues. First, it could start leveraging the pressure created by the Contras to obtain concessions from Managua. Second, engaging in the peace process built goodwill with Congress and the American people. Shultz recognized that Reagan's objectives made it likely that the U.S. was in for a prolonged struggle in Nicaragua. The administration would need that goodwill going forward as it made its case for a sustained military and diplomatic operation. Shultz believed the Contra operation prevented the spread of communism, but he remained concerned that Congress could pull the funding as early as that year.⁷⁹

Shultz acknowledged that supporting the Contras created a political liability for the administration. The White House needed to better manage the public diplomacy aspect of the operation. Shultz wrote to the president that he "recognize[d]... that a growing anti-Sandinista force raises questions about program objectives on the Hill.... Clearly we should avoid steps that invite excesses which would materially assist Congressional efforts to defeat our policy." The "excesses," also referred to as human rights violations, risked pushback from a Congress in which many of its members did not feel comfortable supporting guerrilla warfare in Central America. Shultz predicted that a successful guerrilla war effort would take several years. Opening negotiations with Managua, according to Shultz, opened space for the administration to continue its efforts in Central America, making

⁷⁹ George P. Shultz to Ronald W. Reagan, "Central America: We Need Both More Military Action and a Negotiating Process," Memorandum, January 28, 1983, 2, Accession number: EL00775, Digital National Security Archive.

“pressure on the ‘secret war’ and human rights issues easier to contain. It positions us to gather any concessions that may be induced. And by engaging regional powers it can preempt unhelpful initiatives.”⁸⁰ Shultz wanted the administration to exert greater control over the narrative at home and over any multilateral talks that would take place over Central America. Losing control of peace talks risked undermining the whole operation. Negotiation served only to improve the image of the war and did not carve a path to a resolution.

Administration officials and intelligence analysts found that human rights could deflect attention and public discourse regarding Nicaragua away from the Contras. The CIA saw human rights in public diplomacy as an important political weapon for both sides of the Contra War. Intelligence analysts found that the FSLN tried to discredit the resistance groups by alleging they committed human rights violations. The CIA also claimed that Sandinista security forces made up stories of human rights violations by the Contras and blamed the Contras for abuses committed by the government forces.⁸¹ The State Department found that support for efforts in Central America declined when the media started emphasizing the covert nature of military action against Nicaragua. White House public diplomacy could counter Sandinista and U.S. media issue-framing and opposition voices in Congress by turning attention to the president’s goals of creating and maintaining democracies in Central America, of promoting economic development, of protecting national security, and of engaging in multilateral peace negotiations. Officials believed that

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1-2.

⁸¹ “Central America,” Background Paper (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, May 27, 1983), 28, Accession number: NI01708, Digital National Security Archive.

“vigorously” promoting advances in human rights conditions that came from pressure on the FSLN, such as the release of political prisoners, movement toward free elections, and progress on a regional peace process would affect the debate over Nicaragua in the administration’s favor. The White House would have to contend with what officials interpreted as the media’s undue emphasis on human rights abuses by the Contras, but strong evidence of positive developments in the region would neutralize the criticism. Also, State Department officials advised the administration to highlight how creating democracy served as the best method for defending human rights.⁸²

In an address before a joint session of Congress in April 1983, the president did just that, drawing the nation’s attention to the human rights violations of the Nicaraguan government and the natural consequence of an emerging armed opposition to stand against the repression. Reagan accused the Sandinistas of creating a dictatorship to replace a dictatorship despite promising democracy and free and fair elections. The Sandinistas controlled or censored all media. They forcibly removed the Miskito Indians and burned their villages and crops. They even encouraged mob violence against independent human rights organizations in Nicaragua. In the face of such repression, Reagan questioned how an armed rebellion could not emerge. He classified the opposition not as former members of Somoza’s forces, but as former members of the anti-Somoza revolutionary coalition that fought with the Sandinistas. These forces turned to fight the Sandinistas after the

⁸² “Public Diplomacy Strategy Paper: Central America,” Strategy Paper (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean, May 5, 1983), 2-4, Accession number: IC00096, Digital National Security Archive.

government rejected the path to democracy. The president also compared the Nicaraguan case to El Salvador, as other members of his administration would do. Reagan found that the Salvadoran government made “every effort to guarantee democracy, free labor unions, freedom of religion, and a free press,” but those efforts were under attack by guerrilla insurgents. He blamed Nicaragua for supporting the violence from guerrilla attacks plaguing El Salvador, but, to be clear to all watching and listening to his address, declared that the United States did not seek to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The Reagan administration only wanted to prevent the Nicaraguans from spreading violence and instability throughout the region.⁸³ El Salvador made progress toward the goals of democracy and human rights, which could only be accomplished by determined commitment by leaders such as President Álvaro Alfredo Magaña Borja of El Salvador.⁸⁴

“Nicaragua today is a nation abusing its own people and its neighbors.” In July at the International Longshoremen’s Association in Florida, the president again addressed what he saw as Nicaraguan totalitarianism resisted only by the Contras. “The guerrilla bands fighting in Nicaragua are trying to restore the true revolution and keep the promises to the OAS. Isn’t it time that all of us in the Americas worked together to hold Nicaragua accountable for the promises made and broken 4 years ago?”⁸⁵ He appealed to the audience and to Congress to stand up to the Nicaraguan

⁸³ Ronald W. Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America. April 27, 1983,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 603-04.

⁸⁴ Ronald W. Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on the Situation in Central America August 13, 1983,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 1157.

⁸⁵ Ronald W. Reagan, “Remarks at the Association’s 46th Quadrennial Convention in Hollywood, Fla. July 18, 1983,” in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* (1983), Monday, July 25,

advance on Central America and provide the resources to do it. “Human rights means working at problems, not walking away from them. Without the necessary funds, there’s no way for us to prevent the light of freedom from being extinguished in Central America, and then it will move on from there.” The president appealed to Congress for sufficient funds to defend human rights.⁸⁶

Congressional testimony by Elliott Abrams, then assistant secretary of state for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, demonstrated how administration officials operationalized human rights to support the Contra operation. While testifying before the House Human Rights and International Organizations subcommittee, Abrams stated that the administration developed a preventative approach to human rights by promoting democracy. Building democracy was the ultimate, long-range objective of U.S. policy because human rights naturally flowed from democracy. He argued that “[d]emocracies have the best human rights records, for an obvious reason: When people can choose their government and dismiss it, that government is less likely to abuse their human rights and will be held to account by the people for any abuses it may commit.” Democracy promotion involved encouraging and aiding institutions that strengthen free societies, such as universities, a free press, and trade unions.⁸⁷ Promoting democracy, as articulated by Abrams, involved establishing conditions and institutions that, over time, would create noticeable change in human rights conditions.

1983, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 1012.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 1014.

⁸⁷ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Review of U.S. Human Rights Policy: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 98th Cong., 1st sess., 1983, 2-3.

In another hearing, Abrams stated that Nicaraguan human rights violations required the United States to act because the Sandinistas transported violence and repression to El Salvador by arming the insurgents. Abrams agreed that the Sandinistas committed less violence than the government of El Salvador, but the Nicaraguan government worked against democracy while the Salvadoran government tried to establish democratic institutions. Testifying with Abrams, Langhorne Motley, assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs, argued that the administration wanted a democratically elected government in Nicaragua to ensure a peaceful and more stable political environment in Central America. The Contras helped achieve this objective because the Contras forced the Nicaraguan government to focus inward and maintain domestic security rather than looking outward to exporting revolution.⁸⁸ Abrams went a step further with this line of reasoning, stating that pressuring the Sandinistas “to have an election is part of a human rights policy.”⁸⁹ For administration purposes, the Contras served human rights.

A surprised Gus Yatron asked Abrams to clarify his statement. Did Abrams mean to say that violence and sabotage by a paramilitary force served human rights? Abrams reaffirmed his position and stated the United States applied pressure to Nicaragua, like other nations, to move it in the direction of democracy. Yatron continued to push the question, asking Abrams to “stand by the statement that the

⁸⁸ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittees on Human Rights and International Organizations and on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, *U.S. Policy in Central America: Hearings Before the Subcommittees on Human Rights and International Organizations and on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 98th Cong., 1st sess., 1983, 40, 47-49.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

kind of pressure we are bringing against Nicaragua is part of our human rights policy.” Abrams did not retreat, but, instead, argued that the United States and the whole “Western World” brought that pressure against Nicaragua. Yatron disagreed that the Western World engaged in the kind of pressure put on Nicaragua by the United States and asked if the Office of Human Rights concurred that the appropriate method to defend human rights came from covert military aid. Abrams declined to get into specifics in the open hearing.⁹⁰

5. Conclusion

NGOs achieved a significant, though limited, victory in shaping the rhetoric used by the president and his administration when explaining U.S. support of the Contras. An administration that had been reluctant to acknowledge the importance of human rights in its foreign policy objectives transitioned, at least rhetorically, to promoting its human rights bona fides in Nicaragua. Yet, human rights for Reagan were tied to the Cold War. Combating communism and containing the threat of totalitarianism served human rights. The use of violence and sabotage to stop communism served human rights.

NGOs found this line of reasoning paradoxical. The Nicaragua Network pointed to the reforms of the Sandinistas as the new government engaged in state building projects to provide health care, education, and improved infrastructure to the Nicaraguan people. WOLA reported on the reduction of human rights violations by the new Nicaraguan government and the comparative social stability in Nicaragua as El Salvador and Guatemala plunged ever deeper into violence. CFNFP rejected

⁹⁰ Ibid., 66.

the Cold War construct and questioned how American values could accept U.S. policy that sought the overthrow of a legally constituted government by supporting individuals known for their history of torture, arbitrary violence, and extrajudicial killing while serving Somoza.

Cold War politics still ruled Washington, and Reagan enjoyed popular support in the country and in Congress. During the final months of 1983 and first half of 1984, the president's approval numbers were consistently over 50 percent.⁹¹ In the final week of 1983, Congress approved military funding of \$24 million for the Contras for fiscal year 1984.⁹² Presented as a question of supporting freedom fighters against communism, Congress, however reluctantly, would support the Contras. The question did not remain one of freedom versus communism. Events would continue to alter the question facing lawmakers, thereby altering the influence of human rights and the way Americans interpreted human rights as applied to situations such as the Contra War. The tactics of the Contras and the CIA, the conduct and politics of Sandinista leadership, and the actions of the Reagan administration would all influence how Americans interpreted human rights and how human rights framed circumstances in Nicaragua.

⁹¹ "Presidential Job Approval: Ronald Reagan," The American Presidency Project at UC Santa Barbara, accessed March 15, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/popularity.php>.

⁹² Peace, *A Call to Conscience*, 81.

CHAPTER 3 – ALTERED PERCEPTIONS: NEGOTIATING PEACE AND THE MINING OF NICARAGUAN PORTS, 1984-1985

Reagan's embracing of human rights and the peace process while condemning the Nicaraguan government as a puppet of the Soviets and Cubans fit with most Americans' perception of human rights in the early 1980s. However, those perceptions changed as circumstances in Nicaragua changed. The focus of the human rights discussion moved away from the policies and ideology of the Sandinistas to more closely consider the conduct of the Contras and the CIA. The Reagan administration and the CIA received international condemnation for sabotage missions, particularly the operation in which CIA operatives laid naval mines in Nicaraguan ports. Despite the public façade of Reagan pursuing peace for Central America through a negotiated settlement, in 1984, evidence seemed to prove otherwise.

Advocates for an end to the Contra operation seized the opportunity to emphasize the threat U.S. support for the Contras posed to human rights in Nicaragua. NGOs exposed the contradictions between Reagan's words in seeking human rights and peace and his actions of maintaining violence. Evidence of U.S. involvement in the mining of Nicaraguan ports provided NGOs and the Sandinista officials demonstrable evidence that the Contras and U.S. officials violated human rights and international law. The administration moved to even shakier political ground by limiting U.S. consent to jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice in anticipation of a claim filed against it by the Nicaraguan government arising from the

CIA operations. Though legally defensible, the move added another layer of objection to the administration's Nicaragua policy.

In early 1984, most Americans did not agree with Reagan's support of the Contras and wanted Washington to help bring peace to Nicaragua. The Harris Survey found that 60 percent of Americans did not want the government to provide covert aid to the Contras to overthrow the Sandinista government, and a majority of those surveyed had serious concerns that funding the insurgents in Nicaragua would drag the United States into the conflict.¹ News of the mining did even more damage to the popularity of the Contra program. However, in early 1984, the president enjoyed a job approval rating of well over 50 percent.² Americans may not have liked the Contras, but they liked him. That made it difficult for NGOs to persuade Congress to stand against Reagan on Nicaragua, but activists used human rights arguments to rally the public and empower members of Congress to do just that.

1. Contadora and the Beginning of Peace Talks

The Reagan administration may not have had strong interest in a negotiated settlement in 1983, but Latin American governments demonstrated a firm commitment to resolve the conflict in Nicaragua and further their own interests in peace and stability in Central America. The president did not oppose peace, but he first required the Sandinistas to accept a dramatic restructuring of the government or

¹ Louis Harris, "Kissinger Commission Recommendations Rejected by Public" (The Harris Survey, January 19, 1984), 1, Acc. 91A-099, Box 9, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

² "Presidential Job Approval: Ronald Reagan," The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/popularity.php?pres=40&sort=time&direct=DESC&Submit=DISPLAY>, accessed November 29, 2017.

their relinquishing of power. Short of such concessions, the administration would continue supporting the Contras until the United States could negotiate from a position of strength and impose democratic reforms. Leaders among the Latin American nations brought the Central American governments together and pursued more pragmatic terms.

Central American peace talks took place through much of the 1980s, beginning with the Contadora Initiative. In 1982, Mexican president José López Portillo y Pacheco visited Managua and announced the Declaration of Managua. The Declaration served as a framework to pursue a mediation involving the Central American nations as the main participants and the United States and Cuba as the principal outside parties.³ Over one hundred members of Congress signed a letter requesting the administration pursue the proposal for mediation initiated by Mexico and later backed by Venezuela. U.S. lawmakers urged the president to “respond positively to the Mexican-Venezuelan initiative and to encourage all parties in the region to end the military confrontation and to begin the process of political dialogue.”⁴ Under pressure to support the peace process, Reagan agreed and gave López Portillo his endorsement to try to bring the Nicaraguans and Cubans to the negotiating table.⁵ Out of these plans came the Contadora Initiative. The foreign

³ Terry Karl, “Mexico, Venezuela, and the Contadora Initiative,” in *Confronting Revolution: Security Through Diplomacy in Central America*, ed. Morris J. Blachman, William M. LeoGrande, and Kenneth E. Sharpe (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 276.

⁴ 107 Members of Congress to Ronald Reagan, Letter, October 6, 1982, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 5, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵ Karl, “Mexico, Venezuela, and the Contadora Initiative,” 271–85.

ministers of Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama met in 1983 on Contadora Island off the coast of Panama to plan out a Central America mediation.⁶

The “Contadora Initiative could open a new chapter in Latin American politics...,” Rep. Bill Alexander declared, signifying “a new emphasis on dialog and negotiation, rather than on war and confrontation, as tools of diplomacy.”⁷ A Latin American-led peace process offered hope that Contadora could be a model for achieving regional peace agreements. Alexander saw Contadora as a way for the United States to listen to and understand the people of Central America rather than continue with unilateralism.⁸ If U.S. relations with Latin America suffered from a history of intervention, Contadora-like initiatives, with the support of the United States, could build trust and stronger ties between Latin America and the United States and lead to more stability within the Western Hemisphere.

Fortunately for the organizing states, the Nicaraguan government also publicly embraced, albeit haltingly, the Contadora Initiative. The Council of State expressed skepticism that Reagan would eagerly and openly engage in peace talks. Trying to pressure Reagan into participating in good faith, the Council referenced the enthusiasm among members of Congress.⁹ This followed a pattern among Sandinista officials of reaching or anticipating stalemate with the president and then appealing

⁶ “Resource Book: The Contadora Process” (U.S. Department of State, 1985), 1, Latin American Strategic Studies Institute papers, Box 1, Hoover Institution Archives; Dick D’Amato, “Report on Trip to Central American Countries July 5-16, 1986” August 5, 1986, 15, Digital National Security Archive.

⁷ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The Americas at the Crossroads: Report of the Inter-American Dialog: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 98th Cong., 1st sess., 1983, 3

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-5.

⁹ Nunez, “Declaration of the Council of State,” 1.

directly to the U.S. Congress and to the American people with messages of human rights and peace.

The Anticolonial Human Rights discourse served as the ideological basis on which participating nations found common ground and began negotiations. In September 1983, the Contadora countries (Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama) began mediation with the five Central American nations (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras). They had the ambitious goal of producing a comprehensive settlement to resolve the sources of tension and violence in the region.¹⁰ Discussions among the Central American countries and the Contadora Group led to an agreement in September called the “Document of Objectives.” The Document of Objectives identified twenty-one goals for the negotiation process and stated principles upon which the Contadora nations based those objectives.¹¹ The objectives included ending the armed conflict among and within nations; respecting and ensuring “the exercise of human, political, civil, economic, social, religious and cultural rights”; promoting the democratic process and free expression; ending the arms race in Central America; and terminating arms trafficking or other support to groups intent on destabilizing Central American nations. The first two principles were “The self-determination of peoples” and “Non-intervention.”¹² Nicaragua agreed to carry out the twenty-one objectives, and each of the Central American nations supported the document.¹³ Subsequent efforts focused

¹⁰ D’Amato, “Report on Trip to Central American Countries July 5-16, 1986,” 15–16.

¹¹ “Resource Book: The Contadora Process,” 1.

¹² “Document of Objectives,” September 9, 1983, 1–3, Carnegie Mellon University Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.library.cmu.edu/awweb/awarchive?type=file&item=471869>.

¹³ “Central America: The Ends and Means of U.S. Policy,” § Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (1984), 11; “The History of the Contadora Process”

on implementing the twenty-one goals.¹⁴ Nicaragua proposed the countries fulfill the objectives through methods such as bilateral and regional non-aggression pacts, arms control, and democratization. Negotiations continued among the Contadora participants for the next year to implement an agreement based on the shared goals.¹⁵

Hoping that Contadora would progress further, members of Congress offered their encouragement for the process. In April 1984, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs took up House Concurrent Resolution 261, which offered support to the Contadora Group for its work in trying to resolve the Nicaragua war. Michael Barnes argued that Congress should again go on record and express its approval of the Contadora nations in their work and any agreements they reached. Rep. Stephen Solarz believed that, if the Contadora effort failed, the fighting would escalate in El Salvador and Nicaragua, possibly drawing in the other Central American countries. Peaceful negotiation through this process offered the best and only way to effectively resolve the conflict. Solarz noted that the Reagan administration had expressed its support for the peace process, and he argued that Congress needed to express its bipartisan support for the negotiations.¹⁶

There appeared a real chance for a breakthrough during the summer of 1984, but clashing human rights interpretations stood in the way. The administration agreed to meet with the Sandinistas for peace talks in Manzanillo, Mexico. Both sides believed the other to be ready to discuss peace. However, hard-liners in

(Berkeley, CA: Central American Research Institute, 1985), Nicaragua Network Records, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁴ "Resource Book: The Contadora Process," 1.

¹⁵ "The History of the Contadora Process."

¹⁶ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Legislation Concerning Latin America: Colombia, the Contadora Process, and El Salvador: Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 98th Cong., 2nd sess., 1984, 1-5.

Washington wanted to torpedo the negotiations from the beginning. Negotiators received instructions to demand the Sandinistas put in place an immediate path toward democracy in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguans would never agree to terms over restructuring the government because they saw that as an attempt at U.S. intervention in domestic matters, and these were not open for discussion. Furthermore, high ranking hard-liners within the Reagan administration such as Jeane Kirkpatrick and CIA Director William Casey had no interest in pursuing a peace agreement and would not allow a compromise.¹⁷

Conflicting human rights discourses continued to influence the peace process through Contadora. After the Manzanillo talks went nowhere, the Contadora Group put together a peace agreement in the fall of 1984 that the Nicaraguan government agreed to sign. Work among the Contadora participants led to a draft agreement on September 7, 1984, that included provisions for the withdrawal of all foreign military advisers, prohibited foreign military exercises, and required periodic free elections.¹⁸ U.S. officials balked, but the process had taken on a life of its own and produced an agreement without the approval of the president. Not only did the agreement leave the Sandinistas in place, it eliminated the possibility for the United States to provide future aid to the Contras or El Salvador, terms the administration could not accept. Caught off guard, the Reagan administration convinced its allies in El Salvador, Honduras, and Costa Rica to voice new objections to the agreement and withdraw

¹⁷ Dennis Gilbert, "Nicaragua," in *Confronting Revolution: Security Through Diplomacy in Central America*, ed. Morris J. Blachman, William M. LeoGrande, and Kenneth E. Sharpe (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 121.

¹⁸ "Resource Book: The Contadora Process," 2.

their approval.¹⁹ The Sandinista government declared it would agree to this draft with no material changes.²⁰ According to historian Hal Brands, Daniel Ortega accepted this agreement knowing the United States would reject it. Ortega used the opportunity to portray the Reagan administration as insincere in pursuing peace.²¹

The Reagan administration would not allow a peace agreement to go forward until the long-term strategy behind the Contra insurgency bore fruit. The demands of El Salvador, Honduras, and Costa Rica for revisions to the treaty blocked progress because the Nicaraguans would not agree to any revisions.²² Reagan needed the Contras to continue terrorizing the population and drain domestic support and resources from the government while the United States crippled the Nicaraguan state through trade and financial restrictions.²³ Secretary of State Shultz let the president know that achieving concessions from the Nicaraguans would take time and a serious commitment from the administration and the American people.²⁴ The agreement reached in September 1984 potentially stood in the way of these plans. In the meantime, the administration would nominally engage in the peace process, staying involved just enough to claim it stood for peace and human rights while accusing the Nicaraguans of delay tactics.²⁵

¹⁹ Gilbert, "Nicaragua," 121.

²⁰ "Resource Book: The Contadora Process," 2–3.

²¹ Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, 218.

²² "The History of the Contadora Process."

²³ Peace, *A Call to Conscience*, 23–24.

²⁴ George P. Shultz to Ronald W. Reagan, "Central America Dialogue: Status and Prospects," Memorandum, September 6, 1983, 1–3, Accession number: IC00186, Digital National Security Archive.

²⁵ Ronald W. Reagan, "Address to the Nation. May 9, 1984," in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (1984), Monday, May 14*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1984 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 677.

2. Naval Mines and the Shifting Politics of the Contra War

As the administration slow-played the peace process, Reagan confirmed for his critics the danger of his Nicaragua policy. Newspaper reports revealed that the CIA orchestrated the mining of two Nicaraguan ports on the Pacific Ocean, Corinto and Puerto Sandino. Armed with this new evidence and able to play on the anger of Congress, NGOs refocused the human rights debate on the Contras and their benefactors in the White House.²⁶ The mining of the Nicaraguan ports, followed up with the Reagan administration's quick avoidance of accountability in the International Court of Justice over matters involving Central America, led to international condemnation and contributed to a temporary undoing of Reagan's Contra program. Contra opponents received another boost to their cause when Latin American leaders accused the United States of obstructing the Contadora peace process.²⁷

The mining of Nicaraguan ports came as part of a larger effort by the CIA to extend its mission beyond training and advising to help the Contras in the field. By early 1983, the Contras succeeded in spreading violence and fear throughout rural areas of Nicaragua, mostly in the northern areas close to Honduras. However, these attacks did not cause any significant damage, financially or politically, to the Sandinista regime. To help speed up the destabilization process, the CIA launched its own campaign of sabotage, attacking port facilities, oil production facilities, power

²⁶ David Rogers, "U.S. Role in Mining Nicaraguan Harbors Reportedly Is Larger than First Thought," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 6, 1984, The Wall Street Journal, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

²⁷ "Nicaragua: The House Confronts the President," *Update: Latin America*, June 1984, Box 30, Folder: WOLA [Early docs] 2 of 2, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

plants, bridges, and other infrastructure and utility facilities. In early 1984, in several operations, CIA-trained agents even used U.S. planes and helicopters to bomb military and civilian targets.²⁸

In December 1983, the White House authorized the CIA to place mines in Nicaraguan ports.²⁹ Mines, whether land or naval, caused indiscriminate damage and injury. They could kill civilians of any nationality. They also could continue killing after a conflict ended. Consequently, international law and custom had condemned the use of naval mines since the early twentieth century.³⁰ During February and March 1984 the mines damaged or sank at least two fishing boats, a Dutch dredging ship, and a Soviet oil tanker.³¹

When information about the mining of the Nicaraguan ports inevitably leaked to the press, Reagan received swift and severe condemnation from the Soviets, from U.S. allies, and from members of both parties in Congress, some of whom asserted that Reagan's actions violated international law.³² Most of Congress did not know anything about the mining until *The Wall Street Journal* broke the story on April 6, 1984.³³ More reporting on the mining came out in the following days. Barry Goldwater (R-AZ), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and an advocate for Reagan's foreign policy, was irate. Goldwater sent a scathing private letter to CIA Director Casey accusing him and his agency of not being forthright

²⁸ Kornbluh, "The Covert War," 28–31.

²⁹ "The Mining: Chronology of a Controversy," *Congressional Quarterly*, April 21, 1984, 905, Legislative Relations, 1969-1996, Box 90, Robert J. Dole Archive and Special Collections.

³⁰ Steven Haines, "1907 Hague Convention VIII Relative to the Laying of Automatic Submarine Contact Mines," *International Law Studies* 90, no. 412 (2014): 413–45.

³¹ "The Mining: Chronology of a Controversy," 905.

³² Arnson, *Crossroads*, 148.

³³ Rogers, "U.S. Role in Mining Nicaraguan Harbors Reportedly Is Larger than First Thought."

with Goldwater or the committee about the mining operation. Just days earlier, the Senate approved an appropriation of \$21 million for the Contras after Goldwater assured his colleagues that Reagan had not approved the then-rumored mining. When Goldwater learned the truth with the rest of the country, he declared that the mining was “an act violating international law..., an act of war. For the life of me, I don’t see how we are going to explain it.”³⁴ A majority of the Senate agreed, and, by a vote of 84-12, the senators condemned the mining. The House followed with its own condemnation of the mining in a 281-11 vote and had yet to approve the additional \$21 million for the Contras.³⁵ The president considered this a “rebellion” by Congress and worried that lawmakers would soon cut off Contra funding.³⁶

Days after *The Wall Street Journal* story, Managua filed a complaint against the United States in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) alleging human rights violations stemming from the sabotage operations, including the mining, and the CIA’s other actions in Nicaragua in coordination with the Contras. The Nicaraguan government claimed that, in early 1984, the CIA and the Contras, working with Honduran forces, greatly increased the number and size of attacks on Nicaraguan military facilities and personnel, civilians, and infrastructure, such as fuel storage and transportation, as part of an effort to destabilize and overthrow the Nicaraguan government.³⁷ Anticipating these claims, the White House issued a revised consent

³⁴ Barry M. Goldwater to William J. Casey, Letter, April 9, 1984, 1, Document number NI02047, Understanding the Iran-Contra Affairs, Brown University, https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding_the_Iran_Contra_Affair/documents/d-nic-9.pdf.

³⁵ “The Mining: Chronology of a Controversy,” 905.

³⁶ Ronald Reagan, “Tuesday, April 10, 1984,” in *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 231.

³⁷ “Application Instituting Proceedings,” *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and Against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States of America)*, (International Court of Justice, April 9, 1984), 1-5.

to the jurisdiction of the ICJ, removing from the ICJ's jurisdiction claims against the United States related to Central America.³⁸ The White House called the filing of the complaint by Managua a tactic of delay in the peace process and a way to find sympathetic ears for the Sandinista position. Kenneth W. Dam, deputy secretary of state, referred to it as "forum shopping." After agreeing to participate in the Contadora process, Dam argued that the Nicaraguans tried to move the venue to the UN and avoid Contadora. The Sandinistas then tried to move the negotiations to the UN Security Council.³⁹ The move to alter jurisdiction served as a defense of the supposed nefarious methods of the Nicaraguan government.⁴⁰

At a hearing of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Michael Barnes gave voice to the shared anger among members of Congress toward the administration's handling of Nicaraguan policy and relations with the Sandinista government. Barnes noted the international condemnation of Reagan's actions, citing the British Prime Minister denouncing U.S. actions as dangerous to international shipping and to the principles long held by the United States. Each non-U.S. member of the U.N. Security Council voted to condemn U.S. actions in Nicaragua. Barnes noted that "[n]ot one nation, not even our closest allies, voted with us." He also reminded his House colleagues that not even the Republican-controlled Senate could support the administration's actions. Barnes agreed with those senators who believed

³⁸ "Counter-Memorial of the United States of America (Questions of Jurisdiction and Admissibility)," *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and Against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States of America)*, (International Court of Justice, August 17, 1984), 74-86.

³⁹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The Mining of Nicaraguan Ports and Harbors: Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 98th Cong., 2nd sess., 1984, 4.

⁴⁰ "Statement by the Principal Deputy Press Secretary to the President. April 10, 1984," in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (1984), Monday, April 16, 1984*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1984 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 518.

Reagan committed an act of war against Nicaragua without first informing the Congress or American people.⁴¹

The ICJ case also troubled Barnes and demonstrated to him Reagan's disregard for peaceful negotiations to end the conflict in Central America. He stated that Reagan "has compounded our national embarrassment by asserting the right to remove this aggression from the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice after the aggression has already been perpetrated." Barnes argued that all participants in the Contadora process would say that the U.S. represented the biggest obstacle to a final settlement of the conflicts in Central America. In addition, Barnes claimed that the Contadora nations saw the continued and increased presence of foreign military forces as only escalating the tension in the region, undermining the peace process.⁴²

The CIA's role in the mining did significant damage to Reagan's relationship with Congress with respect to his Nicaragua policy, especially when it took two months for the administration to inform the Senate Intelligence Committee of the operation.⁴³ Consequently, funding for the Contras ran into trouble. The Senate had already approved additional funding without restrictions.⁴⁴ In the House, after members learned of the mining operation, debate turned against Reagan's request and the funding stalled in conference with the House in a supplemental appropriations bill (H.J. Res. 492). House leadership, namely Speaker Tip O'Neill,

⁴¹ U.S. Congress, House, Committee, *The Mining of Nicaraguan Ports and Harbors*, 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁴³ John Felton, "Hill Presses Reagan on Central America Policy," *Congressional Quarterly*, April 14, 1984, 831, Legislative Relations, 1969-1996, Box 90, Robert J. Dole Archive and Special Collections.

⁴⁴ "Staff Meeting" (Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, April 5, 1984), Acc. 90A-113, Box 20, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

intended to block passage of the \$21 million and end all aid for the Contras when the previously appropriated \$24 million funding ran out in May 1984.⁴⁵ The administration sought additional Contra aid as part of a \$1.896 billion military and economic aid proposal that would supplement spending for fiscal year 1984 and authorize spending for fiscal year 1985. The House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, chaired by Barnes, cut out Contra aid and added many conditions and prohibitions on the U.S. military's involvement in Central America. When the proposal made it to the full House Foreign Affairs Committee for debate, liberals prevented any funding from going back into the aid package and kept in the restrictions on the military's activity in the region.⁴⁶

Democrats in the House then agreed with Republicans to postpone debate over the Central America aid package by removing it from the foreign aid bill. However, rather than waiting for a full debate, Democrats on the House Foreign Affairs Committee presented their position to the House Rules Committee to have their language added to the foreign aid authorizations bill. With little resistance from the committee's Republicans, the Democrats gained approval to add two amendments, including a provision that encouraged the Contadora peace process by offering \$250 million for bilateral and regional economic aid for Central American countries once they reached a comprehensive agreement. The Democrats also prohibited additional training exercises with Honduran forces, which had enflamed

⁴⁵ John Felton, "Central America: An Open Wound on the Hill," *Congressional Quarterly*, April 21, 1984, 903, Legislative Relations, 1969-1996, Box 90, Robert J. Dole Archive and Special Collections.

⁴⁶ "Tough Conditions on Central America Aid," Legislative Update, Campaign Against U.S. Intervention (Washington, D.C.: Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, April 9, 1984), 1, Acc. 91A-099, Box 4, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

tensions with Nicaragua, and the removal of all U.S. forces from Honduras except military advisors.⁴⁷

Seizing on discontent on Capitol Hill, NGOs wanted to further drive Congress and the White House apart on Nicaragua by exposing the Contras and Reagan's policy of supporting violence as threats to human rights. Debbie Reuben, interim coordinator of the Nicaragua Network, wrote to organization members and allies to push for greater commitment to make something happen that summer in the anti-Contra movement. Reuben reminded friends and members that "the Nicaraguans tell us over and over, to stop the murderous policies of the Reagan administration the U.S. people must protest loud and clear." Reuben called on all to "inundate every [Congressional] office with communications of opposition to U.S. policy in Central America and particularly CIA Contra support against Nicaragua." She emphasized the need for "activities on a national scale through a strong and viable [Nicaragua Network]." ⁴⁸

The Nicaragua Network also wanted to raise its national profile to further drive anti-Contra opinion, which meant greater cooperation with other large organizations, whether religious organizations, labor organizations, or women's groups. Reuben argued that the Nicaragua Network needed to contribute to a more expansive movement against U.S. intervention. The Coordinating Committee resolved to open the organization's membership to groups not previously invited to join because their mission did not line up perfectly with a solidarity organization.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1–2.

⁴⁸ Debbie Reuben to Friends, Letter, May 1, 1984, 1, Box 2, Central America Working Group Records (DG 145), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 2.

“The [Nicaragua Network] recognizes that the powerful potential represented by current anti-intervention sentiment in this country will only be realized if the broad representative sectors of U.S. society join in the movement to stop U.S. intervention in Central America.”⁵⁰ NGOs, hoping to ride the wave of outrage over administration actions in Central America to expand the organization and grow the anti-Contra movement, helped secure a defeat of U.S. Contra funding.

Representative George Miller (D-CA) wrote to Cindy Buhl, human rights coordinator of CFNFP, stating that “[o]n covert operations in Nicaragua, I think it is fair to say that we could never have succeeded the way we did if it were not for the education and coalition-building carried out by organizations such as your own.” There was, in fact, a building momentum against Contra aid around the country and in Congress fueled by the human rights activism of NGOs. In May 1984, the House voted down, for the third time, a request from Reagan for Contra funding, thanks in large part to the organizing and lobbying of NGOs opposed to Reagan’s policy.⁵¹ Miller further thanked Buhl for her effort by commending her “perseverance and for [her] efforts on behalf of a more humane policy in Central America.”⁵² WOLA assessed that the external events strengthened the resolve in the House and created an opportunity to flip the votes of at least thirty-four former Contra supporters.⁵³

The Coalition continued mobilizing its grass roots activism during the summer of 1984. In June, Buhl wrote to rally her organization’s members to continue

⁵⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁵¹ “Nicaragua: The House Confronts the President.”

⁵² George Miller to Cindy Buhl, Letter, June 18, 1984, Acc. 90A-113, Box 21, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁵³ “Nicaragua: The House Confronts the President.”

lobbying for an expected vote on Contra aid in the fall of 1984. She told supporters they needed another ten senators to secure a majority in the Senate to defeat Contra aid. Groups working in Washington put together a list of nineteen swing votes in the Senate, and Buhl called on each member organization to contact their constituents regularly and have them contact these senators through letters and phone calls in their home states.⁵⁴ CFNFP also distributed materials around the country to grassroots organizations for their local activism and provided them opportunities to participate in national awareness and protest campaigns. The Coalition sent a letter for organizations to sign to send to the House Subcommittee on Foreign Operations regarding the fiscal year 1985 Foreign Aid Appropriations Bill that contained a provision for \$1.262 billion in aid for Central America.⁵⁵

In addition to devising a national strategy, CFNFP provided written materials and hands-on support to advise local organizations. Buhl sent materials to contacts in key districts and states to facilitate grassroots activism toward targeted senators. For example, activists in Iowa targeted Republican Chuck Grassley, and Buhl sent materials to help local groups organize public demonstrations, contact local media, and rally supporters.⁵⁶ She also provided materials and ideas for activism and strategy for sixteen targeted states that summer.⁵⁷ Buhl traveled onsite to assist in building a functioning structure for human rights organizations. In one instance, Buhl

⁵⁴ Cindy M. Buhl to Friend Concerned About U.S. Policy in Central America, Letter, June 28, 1984, Acc. 91A-099, Box 8, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁵⁵ Cindy M. Buhl to Friend Concerned About Central America, Letter, July 27, 1984, Acc. 91A-099, Box 7, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁵⁶ Cindy Buhl to Bob Brammer, Letter, August 6, 1984, Acc. 91A-099, Box 7, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁵⁷ Cindy M. Buhl to Cathie Shimabukuro, Letter, August 6, 1984, Acc. 91A-099, Box 7, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

traveled to Seattle to help the Church Council of Greater Seattle and Central America Peace Campaign to organize a strategy meeting regarding Senators Daniel J. Evans (R-WA) and Slade Gorton III (R-WA). Buhl then provided a list of contacts for the state of Washington as a beginning point for calling the meeting and asked the local organizations to add to the list the contacts they developed through local organizing. According to Buhl, “[w]e count on the local convener knowing the actors better than anyone else.” Buhl also enclosed summaries of recent delegation visits to the D.C. offices of the two senators when activists met with senate staffers. Cooperation between the local and national organizations would be key for CFNFP to build nation-wide influence.⁵⁸

In Iowa, meanwhile, activists with the Catholic Peace Ministry and Stop the Arms Race Committee of Iowa, along with other anti-Contra organizations, held a meeting based on the information and tactics communicated through CFNFP mailing. On August 28, 1984, they discussed lobbying Iowa’s senators to vote against funding the Contras. The group told Buhl they followed the strategy developed by CFNFP of targeting vulnerable swing votes in the Senate. Grassley had twice voted for amendments that prevented funding terrorism and overthrowing the Nicaraguan government. The group reasoned those were the arguments to continue pressing with Grassley.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Cindy M. Buhl to Beth Brunton, Letter, August 7, 1984, Acc. 91A-099, Box 7, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁵⁹ Gwen Hennessey and Bob Brammer to Friends Around the State, Letter, August 14, 1984, Acc. 91A-099, Box 7, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

CFNFP's newsletter regarding Contra aid urged local organizations to keep up the pressure on the nineteen senators targeted as potentially turning against Contra aid.⁶⁰ Focusing on the nineteen conserved resources to allow maximum effort from the local organizations within constituencies and the national organizations in coordinating activities and message.⁶¹ National organizations could not call and send out letters to all members of Congress, but CFNFP reduced the list to key members of Congress.⁶² Carla Pedersen wrote to Buhl from Tucson, AZ, letting Buhl know they were "breathing down his [Senator Dennis DeConcini] neck." She concluded her short, hand-written letter stating "[k]eep up your concise, methodically [sic] efforts – you're great."⁶³ Notes of thanks for Buhl's efforts came from all around the country.

3. Democracy in Nicaragua Through Freedom Fighters and Elections

Reagan's administration continued to repackage the Contras for the American people as defenders of freedom and human rights, while also branding Sandinista Nicaragua as a dangerous totalitarian state. Though Reagan would not admit to U.S.

⁶⁰ "Update on the Drive to End the U.S. Covert Operations Against Nicaragua" (Washington, D.C.: Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, September 12, 1984), Acc. 91A-099, Box 7, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁶¹ The target list of senators consisted of Democrats: Dennis DeConcini (AZ), Lawton Chiles (FL), Sam Nunn (GA), Alan J. Dixon (IL), J. Bennett Johnson (LA), John C. Stennis (MS), David Boren (OK), Ernest Hollings (SC); Republicans: Slade Gorton and Daniel Evans (WA), John Chafee (RI), H. John Heinz III (PA), Bob Packwood (OR), Mark Andrews (ND), David Durenberger and Rudy Boschwitz (MN), Charles Mathias (MD), Chuck Grassley (IA), Percy (IL). (Handwritten Notes (Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, October 1984), Acc. 91A-099, Box 7, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.)

⁶² Cindy M. Buhl, "Update on the Drive to End the U.S. Covert Operations Against Nicaragua," Urgent Action (Washington, D.C.: Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, September 21, 1984), 2, Acc. 91A-099, Box 8, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁶³ Carla Pedersen to Cindy M. Buhl, Letter, October 1, 1984, Acc. 91A-099, Box 7, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

funding of the Contras, he came to embrace the title of “freedom fighters” in the summer of 1984 and more closely associated his administration with the cause of the Contras. The label “freedom fighters” underscored Reagan’s argument that the Contras fought for democracy and human rights. In that regard, the president compared the Contras to the “freedom fighters who led the American Revolution....”⁶⁴ “Freedom fighters” also helped mask the reality that the Contras wanted to overthrow a legally constituted government and that the United States supported an insurgency. According to the president, the Contras engaged in a “courageous struggle for democracy, for freedom of the press, and for freedom of assembly and worship in their homeland.” Reagan crafted a narrative for the Contras in which they fought for the fundamental rights that people in the United States took for granted. He urged the American people to “ponder long and hard, to reflect on the fatal consequences of complacency and isolationism, and, above all, to understand that freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction.” Reagan argued that the United States had an obligation to itself and to the rest of the world to engage threats to freedom.⁶⁵ Using equally visceral terms, Reagan claimed that “[t]he Nicaragua people are trapped in a totalitarian dungeon...,” and he demanded that the Sandinistas allow free elections to take place as the Contras fought to release the people from their “dungeon” of repression.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 477.

⁶⁵ Ronald W. Reagan, “Remarks on Signing Proclamation 5223. July 16, 1984,” in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (1984), Monday, July 23, 1984*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1984 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 1032.

⁶⁶ Ronald W. Reagan, “Remarks to Participants in a White House Outreach Working Group. July 18, 1984,” in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (1984), Monday, July 23, 1984*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1984 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 1038–39.

The president also continued dismissing the idea that he wanted the Contras to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. “[I]t is a less an overthrow that they’re fighting for as it is a demand that they be allowed to participate in the government and that the government keep its promises as to what it had intended for the people.”⁶⁷ The Boland Amendment made clear that the American people and Congress would not stand for a covert operation intended to overthrow a government. Therefore, Reagan’s administration claimed that the Sandinistas did not constitute a legitimate governing authority. The Sandinistas represented a break from what should have taken place pursuant to the revolution of 1979. They were usurpers. The Contras consisted mostly of individuals who participated in the revolution and fought with the Sandinistas, but the Contras “had that revolution stolen from them by Communist Sandinistas.”⁶⁸ Reagan claimed that his administration wanted to restore to Nicaraguans “the revolution that was promised them...” a revolution for human rights. The president also wanted to ensure that Nicaraguans had a revolution that created democracy.⁶⁹ He relied on the Contras to reestablish, not overthrow, a legitimate government. Reagan’s framing of the Contra mission within Democratic Human Rights infused his Nicaragua policy with a legal and moral legitimacy.

The Sandinistas made a “contract during the revolution,” he said, in exchange for the OAS helping convince Somoza to step aside, according to Reagan. The

⁶⁷ “Interview with Steven R. Weisman and Francis X. Clines of the New York Times. March 28, 1984,” in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1984 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 447.

⁶⁸ “Telephone Interview with Forrest Sawyer of WAGA-TV in Atlanta, Georgia. July 27, 1984,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1984 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 1116.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1117.

Nicaraguans denied such a quid pro quo arrangement, but Reagan repeatedly claimed that the Sandinistas violated it.⁷⁰ Not only that, he added the Sandinistas also betrayed those who fought with them, befriending the Soviets and Cubans.⁷¹ The president wanted to see free elections in Nicaragua because he saw “elections as the best way to guarantee peace, human freedom, and responsive government.”⁷² Reagan argued that “[o]nly democracy can guarantee that a government will not turn against its own people, because in a democracy, people are the masters of government, not the servant.”⁷³

Reagan linked democracy in Nicaragua to the broader mission of the Reagan Doctrine. He referenced the Declaration of Independence and the principle that governments derived their authority and power from the consent of the governed. “Well, those words reveal the meaning of human rights and our philosophy of liberty that is the essence of America.”⁷⁴ He vowed that the United States would continue to combat “adversaries of freedom” by promoting democracy throughout the world.⁷⁵ In May 1984, the president reminded the country of President Harry Truman’s assurance that the United States would support free peoples everywhere in their fight against communism. Reagan sought the same kind of unity around democracy and

⁷⁰ “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters. July 21, 1983,” in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (1983), Monday July 25, 1983*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 1031.

⁷¹ Ronald W. Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on the Situation in Central America August 13, 1983,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 1157.

⁷² “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters. July 21, 1983,” 1049–50.

⁷³ Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on the Situation in Central America August 13, 1983,” 1156–57.

⁷⁴ Ronald W. Reagan, “Remarks on Signing the Bill of Rights Day and Human Rights Day and Week Proclamation. December 9, 1983,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 1674.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1675.

human rights for Nicaragua and the rest of Central America. He stated that “where democracy flourishes, human rights and peace are more secure...,” again connecting democracy with human rights. The American people only needed the will to get it done, and, at whatever the cost, they could ensure freedom.⁷⁶

Reagan took his case to the United Nations in September 1984 and offered a reading of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that was a full-throated endorsement of the Democratic Human Rights discourse as an inspiration for his foreign policy. The president highlighted the clauses of the UDHR that stated the will of the people of each nation shall be expressed through periodic and legitimate national elections. He also recalled that the UDHR mandated labor union organizing, private property ownership, freedom of movement, and freedom of expression. These were the political and civil rights fundamental to a vibrant democracy, which Reagan sought to install in communist nations.⁷⁷

In his most direct jab at the Sandinistas’ core belief, Reagan also incorporated the right of self-determination as a political right associated with democracy. In his remarks at a December 1984 signing ceremony on International Human Rights Day, the president noted the strong desire for self-determination within Latin American nations. However, instead of understanding self-determination as a right of a collective people to be free from foreign intervention and determine their own political and social destiny, Reagan interpreted it as a right to elections. The

⁷⁶ Reagan, “Address to the Nation. May 9, 1984,” 681.

⁷⁷ Ronald W. Reagan, “Address Before the 39th Session of the General Assembly. September 24, 1984,” in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (1984), Monday, October 1, 1984*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1984 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 1353–54.

president celebrated how so many people of Latin America lived in a democracy.⁷⁸ “Today, all who cherish human rights and individual freedom salute the people of the Americas for their great achievements.” Reagan continued, stating that “regard for human rights and the steady expansion of human freedom have defined the American experience. And they remain today the real moral core of our foreign policy.”⁷⁹

The president’s constant call for elections in Nicaragua left him little room to maneuver once the Sandinistas announced they would hold elections. The Sandinistas scheduled elections for November 4, 1984, for the offices of president and vice-president and for seats on the national assembly that would draft a new constitution. Reagan dismissed the effort, questioning if the elections amounted to anything other than “the kind of rubber-stamp that we see in any totalitarian government.” He argued that no opposing candidates could exist, no opposition parties got involved, and the Sandinistas did not allow campaigning or access to a free press.⁸⁰ No election run by the Sandinista government in its existing form in 1984 could be legitimate. According to the State Department, “the Sandinistas ensured that the electoral process could not result in a peaceful transfer of power. Acting under a State of Emergency which imposed strict censorship and stifled the activities of other parties, the FSLN enacted laws which guaranteed its control over

⁷⁸ Ronald W. Reagan, “Remarks at a Ceremony for the Signing of Proclamation 5287. December 10, 1984,” in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (1984), Monday, December 17, 1984*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1984 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 1891.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1892.

⁸⁰ “Interview with Steven R. Weisman and Francis X. Clines of the New York Times. March 28, 1984,” 447.

every aspect of the electoral process.”⁸¹ This election did not meet the standards of democracy promoted by Reagan. In a radio address to the American people, the president wondered whether the elections would even happen. Reagan also looked for neutral international observers to record any electoral irregularities.⁸²

Similarly, the primary opposition parties in Nicaragua refused to participate, citing decidedly undemocratic conditions that would prevent free elections. Opposition parties claimed mobs interrupted party meetings and that party members were subjected to violence and intimidation. The Sandinistas also controlled all media and limited opposition party access. Parties also had limited ability to purchase and use campaign materials because of rationing mandated by the government. The FSLN did not have the same rationing restrictions.⁸³ These groups claimed the elections would be unwinnable for anyone but the Sandinistas.⁸⁴ The opposition called on the Sandinistas to implement protections for a free electoral process, but the FSLN refused to engage in serious discussions with the opposition parties regarding the electoral process.⁸⁵ In addition, the groups denouncing the elections claimed, and rightfully so, that their participation in the elections would only legitimize the Sandinistas as the ruling party in Nicaragua and contribute to the Sandinistas consolidating their power.⁸⁶ The Nicaraguan opposition claimed that, behind the façade of democracy in Nicaragua, there remained a totalitarian state, and

⁸¹ “Sandinista Elections in Nicaragua” (U.S. Department of State, October 30, 1984), ii, Digital National Security Archive.

⁸² Ronald W. Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation. April 14, 1984,” in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (1984), Monday April 23, 1984*, Administration of Ronald Reagan, 1984 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 552.

⁸³ “Sandinista Elections in Nicaragua,” ii, 6-9.

⁸⁴ Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” 109.

⁸⁵ “Sandinista Elections in Nicaragua,” ii.

⁸⁶ Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” 109.

it looked to the United States and the Contras to reshuffle the power structure.⁸⁷ The Reagan administration supported, even encouraged, the opposition parties to refuse to participate and to challenge the legitimacy of the elections, alleging the elections failed to offer real choice. Seven parties did register and participate in the election, including the FSLN.⁸⁸

Elections certainly served Sandinista political interests domestically and internationally. The Sandinistas forced the Reagan administration to take a position that seemed to contradict his public statements not just favoring but demanding elections in Nicaragua. The elections offered the Sandinistas the opportunity to legitimize their power and show popular support to the people of Nicaragua and to an international audience. A good showing would reenergize support in Latin America and Europe. The Nicaraguan government claimed to make efforts to increase participation, particularly through rolling back restrictions from the State of Emergency laws.⁸⁹ The government had declared a State of Emergency in 1982, paving the way for strict laws governing speech and organizing, and other laws enacted repressive censorship of media and prevented many activities of political parties. The Sandinistas also changed the laws surrounding political parties, speech, and association to prepare for a campaign and electoral process. The Political Parties Law of September 1983 created the National Assembly of Political Parties and the National Council of Political Parties, which oversaw the activities of Nicaragua's political parties. The Political Parties Law required all parties to be anti-imperialist

⁸⁷ "Boletin Internacional," Newsletter (Christian Democratic Solidarity Front, August 1984), 9, Accession number: NI02160, Digital National Security Archive; Gilbert, "Nicaragua," 109.

⁸⁸ "Sandinista Elections in Nicaragua," ii.

⁸⁹ Gilbert, "Nicaragua," 109-10.

and to support the revolution. The Electoral Law of 1984 then set the rules for the 1984 elections.⁹⁰ The Nicaraguan government also restrained itself from interfering in opposition organizing during the campaign process.⁹¹ The Reagan administration dismissed all of this as merely theater to cover up an electoral process allegedly stifled by the repression by the Sandinista regime that ensured victory for Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas.

The Sandinistas won 67 percent of the vote in the November elections with 75 percent of the electorate turning out. International observers recorded an orderly and well executed process.⁹² The observers declared the elections to be real and competitive. Ortega won the presidency and Sergio Ramírez won the vice-presidency. Sixty-one of the ninety-six seats in the National Assembly went to the FSLN.⁹³ The electoral victory of the Sandinistas revealed the wide-spread popularity that the revolution still enjoyed.⁹⁴

WOLA observed the elections with the International Human Rights Law Group (“Law Group”) and reported back to Congress and the American people, largely refuting the administration’s arguments. WOLA and Law Group observers critically analyzed the political process to inform the debate in the United States and the rest of the world with respect to Nicaragua’s political process and, as they wrote, to provide greater “understanding of both the significance and limitations of an electoral process in an underdeveloped country in the aftermath of a profound social

⁹⁰ “Sandinista Elections in Nicaragua,” 4.

⁹¹ Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” 110.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 111.

⁹³ Walker, “Introduction,” 10–11.

⁹⁴ Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” 111.

revolution.” The report noted that the Sandinistas intended for these elections to demonstrate to the world their commitment to political pluralism. The campaign marked the first time that political parties could openly criticize the sitting government. After decades of repressive rule by the Somoza regime, the elections represented “an important step in the country’s political evolution.” The WOLA-Law Group report held the Contras responsible for preventing voter registration and voting in certain areas of the country, and it claimed that Contras assassinated two election officials and kidnapped a candidate for office.⁹⁵

The two organizations found that Nicaragua’s election law “was well conceived and compared favorably with electoral laws in other countries,” and the commission tasked with carrying out the election did so responsibly and independent of the ruling Sandinista party. Yet, even with the new election law, the FSLN candidates held an advantage because the FSLN was the party associated with the Nicaraguan state. Sandinista candidates also enjoyed a stronger party organization than did their opponents. Even so, the report found that all political parties had the opportunity to transmit their messages to voters, even in the face of several incidents of harassment and intimidation and press censorship by FSLN party members. The delegation disagreed with the decision of political parties withdrawing from the election process, arguing that such decisions were “short-sighted and were based on political considerations, in addition to the existing conditions in Nicaragua.” WOLA

⁹⁵ “A Political Opening in Nicaragua: Report on the Nicaragua Elections of November 4, 1984” (Washington, D.C.: International Human Rights Law Group and the Washington Office on Latin America, December 1984), 1-2, 4.

and the Law Group found no evidence of voter fraud or improper vote counting and reporting.⁹⁶

The report noted that conducting elections during a war presented a difficult task, and the war prevented certain areas of Nicaragua from participating. The report held the United States and other governments supporting the war responsible for obstructing the development of the democratic process and political pluralism in Nicaragua and called on the United States to end all such support. Furthermore, the WOLA-Law Group report held the United States responsible for the greatest defects in the political process by encouraging parties and voters to withdraw from the election and working to delegitimize the Nicaraguan democracy.⁹⁷ The turnout was lower than expected, in part due to skepticism fueled by Reagan's criticism.

The WOLA-Law Group report predicted that the experience of the campaign and election in 1984 would encourage those skeptics to turn out for the next election. However, the defiance by some voters and parties toward the electoral process also reflected a desire to undermine the ruling party, which was not going to go away.⁹⁸

4. A Human Rights Victory Over Contra Funding

By late 1984, NGOs opposing the Contra program had forced human rights into the national debate over Nicaragua and flipped the discussion to brand the Contras and their U.S. backers as the ones violating human rights. Congress did openly appropriate funds for the Contras for fiscal year 1984, rather than doing so

⁹⁶ Ibid., 51-52.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 52-53.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

through classified legislation as had been done for 1982 and 1983, but Congress imposed restrictions on the president's ability to use those funds. A majority in Congress had, for the time being, turned against the Contras but was not ready to intervene in the president's foreign policy role to fully cut off the Contras. Congress appropriated \$14 million that would not be released until February 28, 1985, and only after the passage of a joint resolution approving such an action. The House later voted against releasing any of the money. The House also passed a second Boland Amendment with more restrictions on use of funds, prohibiting the CIA, the Department of Defense, and any other intelligence agency from supporting military or paramilitary activities in Nicaragua.⁹⁹

Ed Boland led the fight against Contra aid during the debate over a year-end omnibus spending bill. During negotiations among House and Senate conferees reconciling conflicting bills, Boland rejected any compromise that would have maintained some form of funding to the Contras while pressure mounted on members of Congress to pass a spending bill before the end of the fiscal year and to return to districts to campaign for re-election.¹⁰⁰ Advocates for the Contras accepted that a compromise spending bill would pass both chambers only by taking out all Contra aid.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Robert E. Sanchez, "Contra Aid: A Brief Chronology and Table Showing U.S. Assistance to the Anti-Sandinista Guerrillas (Contras) Fiscal Years 1982-1988," CRS Report for Congress (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, February 5, 1988), 2, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 9, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁰⁰ "Congress Shuts Off Covert Aid," Legislative Update, Campaign Against U.S. Intervention (Washington, D.C.: Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, October 22, 1984), Box 30, Folder: WOLA [Early docs] 2 of 2, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

¹⁰¹ "Congress Shuts Off Covert Aid," 2.

The legislation represented a major triumph for Contra aid opponents. According to CFNFP's "Update" newsletter, Congress "approved the most substantial legislative victory yet achieved by critics of U.S.-Central America policy" when it prohibited any further funding for U.S. covert aid to Nicaragua. The enhanced Boland Amendment dramatically reduced what the administration could do with money it did receive from Congress. To overturn this determination, the president would have to wait until after February 28, 1985, and then submit a report to the Congress requesting a joint resolution justifying why U.S. policy goals would be met only by reinstating funding for covert operation. According to CFNFP, "[a]ll observers concur that it would take a massive electoral disaster for Democratic House incumbents, coupled with a deteriorating political situation inside Nicaragua, to compel the U.S. House of Representatives to reverse its decision to end the covert war." The Coalition called the second Boland Amendment victory a culmination of two and half years of work by anti-Contra aid activists and organizations lobbying Congress and appealing to public opinion.¹⁰²

CFNFP leadership remained supremely confident about the job human rights activists performed and about the future. The Coalition declared that "the war against covert aid was won this week..." and referred to the vote to release funds coming the following year as "just a mop-up battle." The organization credited the victory to lobbying efforts against three swing senators, Dennis DeConcini (D-AZ), Mark Andrews (R-ND), and Bob Packwood (R-OR).¹⁰³ The Coalition told its members to

¹⁰² "Congress Shuts Off Covert Aid," 1.

¹⁰³ "Human Rights Program Report -- December 1984" (Human Rights Working Group of the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, December 1984), Acc. 99A-006, Box 4, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

celebrate a job well done.¹⁰⁴ Buhl credited organizations like those in Iowa with serving “President Reagan a clear and substantive foreign policy defeat.” Grassroots work “directly contributed to creating an atmosphere of pressure which led to [CFNFP] success in halting the covert financing of the ‘secret war.’” In Buhl’s letter to the Iowa organizations, she also noted that members of Congress recognized and thanked them.¹⁰⁵

WOLA and Eldridge also celebrated the victory in Congress defeating Contra aid funding. Eldridge credited Boland as the difference maker, one who “would simply not be moved.” He asked WOLA board members and advisory council members to send a thank you note to Boland.¹⁰⁶ Patricia M. Derian, former assistant secretary for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs in Carter’s Department of State, wrote directly to Boland, thanking him for having “saved a lot of non-combatants’ lives – not many people get to do something so concretely good in life – and many who have the opportunity don’t take it.”¹⁰⁷

Congressional opposition to Contra aid in October 1984, emboldened by NGOs’ human rights advocacy, reflected a broader movement within the Democrat-controlled House to restrain Reagan’s Nicaraguan policy and left an uncertain future for the Contras. The defeats in Congress did not deter the administration on the righteousness of their cause but did persuade officials to seek money from other

¹⁰⁴ Buhl, “Update on the Drive to End the U.S. Covert Operations Against Nicaragua.”

¹⁰⁵ Cindy M. Buhl to Bob Brammer and Gwen Hennessey, Letter, October 26, 1984, Acc. 91A-099, Box 7, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹⁰⁶ Joe Eldridge to WOLA Board and Advisory Council, Letter, October 12, 1984, Box 19, Nicaragua Correspondence 1981-1987, Patricia Murphy Derian Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

¹⁰⁷ Patricia Derian to Edward P. Boland, Letter, October 14, 1984, 1, Box 19, Nicaragua Correspondence 1981-1987, Patricia Murphy Derian Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

sources. Under the direction of Lt. Col. Oliver North, the administration created a network of intermediaries to channel funding from other nations to the Contras for supplies and training in the event Congress no longer provided the needed resources. The administration would use this network of funding to circumvent the Boland Amendment and Congressional opposition to Contra aid.¹⁰⁸

Also, right wing groups opened up their checkbooks to support the Contras directly. The Christian Broadcasting Corporation, the Unification Church, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Citizens for a Better America, Refugee Relief International, the U.S. Council for World Freedom, and the Nicaraguan Freedom Fund among others raised money and provided food, clothing, and medical and other supplies.¹⁰⁹ The National Endowment for the Preservation of Liberty (NEPL) proposed to sponsor “ongoing public education and information programs focusing on timely issues which relate to the expansion of freedom. As such, the foundation has focused on the struggles of freedom fighters.”¹¹⁰ Through the private fundraising efforts, the Contras received over \$50 million when Congress refused further funding. The extralegal fundraising grew more elaborate with a scheme to funnel to the Contras proceeds of U.S. arms sales to Iran without the knowledge of Congress. By 1986, \$10 million to \$30 million was added through the secret Iran-Contra deal. The secret operation involved air drops of munitions and supplies to the Contras, and on

¹⁰⁸ Kornbluh, “The Covert War,” 31.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹¹⁰ “National Endowment for the Preservation of Liberty,” Press Release (National Endowment for the Preservation of Liberty, February 27, 1986), Digital National Security Archive.

October 5, 1986, the Sandinistas shot down one of the cargo planes, bringing everything to a stop and embroiling Washington in scandal.¹¹¹

Activists felt positive about their performance opposing Nicaragua policy through 1984 and about the future of human rights in Nicaragua even before Iran-Contra broke. Cindy Buhl hosted a gathering of anti-Contra activists at her house in Washington to evaluate their success in defeating Reagan's Contra program in late 1984 and look critically at the future of human rights advocacy against the Contras. The group included William LeoGrande of American University, Holly Burkhalter of Americas Watch, Cindy Aronson, then a foreign policy aide in the House of Representatives, Betsy Cohen of the Central American Institute, Jack Malinowsky of American Friends Service Committee, Cheryl Morden of Lutheran World Relief and Christian World Service, Margie Swedish of the Inter-Religious Task Force, Amanda Spake of the Caribbean Basin Project, Gretchen Eick of the United Church of Christ, and Reggie Norton of WOLA. The participants agreed that their organizations succeeded in preventing additional Contra aid by exposing to the nation the human rights abuses in Nicaragua. However, they recognized the challenges that lay in front of them and considered how best to adapt to the new strategies of the Reagan administration that emerged over the past year. The administration's rhetorical focus on the Contras as agents of democracy promotion fighting against communist Sandinistas posed a tremendous challenge to the NGOs' human rights cause.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Kornbluh, "The Covert War," 32–33.

¹¹² Gretchen Eick, "Notes from Strategy Session Oct 15 on Central America," October 26, 1984, 1, Acc. 99A-006, Box 3, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

The activist leaders knew they would need effective ways to respond to the argument because democracy promotion trained the focus on the conduct of the Sandinistas while creating an image of the Contras saving democracy, albeit an image that would not hold up to scrutiny. Malinowsky argued that the administration's use of "democracy" as a defining issue of Nicaragua often overshadowed the arguments made by his and other organizations. He worried that NGOs presented overly complicated and nuanced arguments based on international law or Nicaraguan politics and social conditions. Those arguments did not resonate with the American people while Reagan could simplify the conflict in Nicaragua into a question of democracy versus Soviet communism or terrorism. Also, Malinowsky did not believe that the American people accepted self-determination as a right for Nicaraguans yet, which tended to undermine the more expansive interpretation of human rights for which NGOs and the Nicaraguan government advocated. Even more troubling, Malinowsky believed that the "reality of the wars hasn't come home to people." He argued that the NGOs needed to do a better job of making the simple argument that support of the Contras created human rights violations and that support of the Contras was itself a human rights violation. NGOs needed to emphasize the contradiction between Reagan's words and reality in policy and conditions in Nicaragua.¹¹³

The fact that human rights influenced the debate did represent a success for the organizations. LeoGrande reminded the group that Reagan had intended on replacing human rights in U.S. foreign policy with a focus on international terrorism.

¹¹³ Ibid., 1.

The president did not follow through with his plans because of the importance given to human rights by human rights-conscious NGOs and members of Congress.¹¹⁴ Opposition by the public and Congress to that explicit shift away from human rights caused the administration to pivot back to human rights and to even express support for agrarian reform in El Salvador. The trend toward considering human rights in foreign policy influenced the administration's approach to Nicaragua because of the work of activists. Amanda Spake stated that her contacts within the American press found that peace activism gained a lot of influence when exposing human rights violations and provided an effective counterargument to the administration's portrayal of Nicaragua.

Success needed to be turned into momentum, and the activists determined that NGOs needed to control the conversation with continued reference to Reagan's contradictions. Margie Swedish reported that grassroots organizations expressed disillusionment and frustration when Reagan and the Republicans could claim the moral high ground. Swedish argued that the organizations had to establish their authority on moral grounds through human rights when advocating for a change in U.S. Nicaragua policy. Betsy Cohen added that, while claiming the position of moral authority, their organizations necessarily needed to expose the lies told by

¹¹⁴ A reading of State Department and Congressional records through Reagan's first term tends to support this position. The defeat of Reagan's first pick to for assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs, Ernest W. Lefever, was one of the more dramatic cases of NGOs and members of Congress rejecting the president's intent on diminishing the role of human rights in U.S. foreign policy. Prior to his nomination, Lefever was known as a strong critic of Carter considering human rights in foreign policy decisions and of Congress institutionalizing human rights. Lefever's nomination indicated to human rights advocates where the president stood on the issue. The changing rhetoric regarding Nicaragua also demonstrated the strategic turn.

administration officials regarding Nicaragua policy and Reagan's duplicity in claiming he sought a diplomatic solution in Central America.¹¹⁵

Exposing Americans to the reality of the war would also be critical going forward. Swedish and Buhl agreed with Malinowsky's point that the American people did not comprehend the scale or horror of the Contra War. Swedish suggested showing the American people the real brutality of the war and that focusing attention on human rights would be key. By drawing attention to the human consequences of the war, on both sides, peace NGOs should "reclaim" democracy from the administration and demonstrate that the Contra War did not and could not represent a fight for democracy. Gretchen Eick argued that NGOs could further demonstrate the hypocrisy of democracy promotion by emphasizing the contradictions from an administration that supported a rights-violating regime in El Salvador while it opposed the Sandinistas on human rights terms.¹¹⁶

The underlying premise of discussion at Buhl's house was that the Contra War would continue. Activists would keep facing Reagan's determination to seek his desired form of democracy in Nicaragua while he armed and supported the Contras. In addition, the results of the 1984 election demonstrated that no peaceful reconciliation could occur until the FSLN reached an agreement with the United States. When Sandinista opponents inside Nicaragua believed the United States would eventually force the Sandinistas out of power, the opposition had no incentive to deal with the government. The Sandinistas had no incentive either if they believed those groups worked with the United States and the Contras. In 1984, the prospect of

¹¹⁵ Eick, "Notes from Strategy Session Oct 15 on Central America," 3.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

a Sandinista-U.S. reconciliation seemed remote, especially as the Nicaraguan government continued to purchase arms and equipment from Soviet-bloc countries and build the size of its military while the United States denied the legitimacy of democratic elections in Nicaragua and declared the Nicaraguan military a security threat.¹¹⁷

In his inauguration speech on January 10, 1985, Daniel Ortega offered a message of strength, optimism, and resolve in the face of the existential threat from the United States. He reiterated the position of the Nicaraguan government in relation to U.S. policy and declared his commitment to human rights in Nicaragua. Ortega declared that the Nicaraguan government did not believe in spreading revolution and that it only supported peaceful methods for achieving change. He also reaffirmed his support for the Contadora initiative and his endorsement of the September 7 draft of the agreement reached through Contadora. Like NGOs in the United States, Ortega was attempting to further brand the Contras, the CIA, and the Reagan administration as the threat to human rights while the Nicaraguan government simply defended itself and sought peace. Ortega claimed that the war promoted and perpetuated by the United States had cost some 3,200 lives of individuals under the age of twenty-one.¹¹⁸ Ortega warned that, unless the war could be brought to an end, the Nicaraguan government could not effectively plan for the country's future. He claimed to have no interest in Cold War politics or alliances. He called on other Central American nations not to believe the lies that Nicaragua

¹¹⁷ Gilbert, "Nicaragua," 115.

¹¹⁸ Harry E. Bergold Jr., "Ortega's Inaugural Speech," Cable, January 11, 1985, 2-3, Digital National Security Archive.

supported “a revolution without borders, an armaments race, and repression. Such falsehoods were part of a policy of domination, aggression, genocide, and suppression of dignity and independence.”¹¹⁹

Ortega also warned the United States of the resolve of the Nicaragua people to defend human rights.¹²⁰ “The G[overnment] O[f] N[icaragua] would be a government of national unity and would defend national interests on the constitution on pluralism, the mixed economy, human and religious rights, and on a role for all sectors in the construction and defense of society.” He reiterated the difficulties the country would face in the coming years due to its economic problems. However, Ortega declared that only through beating back U.S. aggression could the country convince the United States that the revolution could not be defeated and would proceed.¹²¹

5. Conclusion

By 1985, NGOs had pushed human rights to the forefront of the debate over Nicaragua.

Human rights did not only influence perceptions of events and conflict in Nicaragua, but by the mid-1980s, they had a significant part in influencing policy. The president referenced human rights with nearly every mention of Nicaragua. Reagan also took a stronger stance of support for the Contras and associated his administration with the freedom fighters as they stood for liberty and democracy against a totalitarian

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 8-9.

regime. Activists called the Contras the human rights violators and advocated cutting their funding to end what looked like U.S.-sponsored terrorism throughout rural Nicaragua.

Cold War doctrine no longer made sense in light of new facts in Nicaragua. While lawmakers supported a U.S. foreign policy that countered communist threats and promoted peace and democracy, NGOs and like-minded members of Congress used human rights to reinterpret the Contras outside of the Cold War construct. The question over funding the Contras did not consider Cold War implications, but, rather, dealt with naval mines and violence against civilians and violating international law. The new question led to a new response from Congress, that being shutting off Contra aid, and it looked like that interpretation of the Contra War would prevail in the future.

Yet, as both Reagan and activists well knew, American perceptions of Nicaragua remained superficial and fleeting. As NGOs and other anti-Contra advocates cautiously celebrated and planned for future activism, Nicaraguans remained ready for prolonged conflict. Circumstances then turned the momentum back to Cold War orthodoxy. An effective public diplomacy campaign, bolstered by Daniel Ortega's visit to Moscow, swung perceptions of human rights in Nicaragua back in the administration's favor.

CHAPTER 4 – THE FREEDOM FIGHTERS: DEMOCRATIC HUMAN RIGHTS IN NICARAGUA, 1985-1986

Evidence gathered by NGOs seemed to support the Sandinista claims that the United States and its proxy fighting force created a serious threat to Nicaraguan human rights. As activists continued to mobilize against President Reagan's Contra policy, organizations such as AW and WOLA published reports of Contra atrocities based on the testimony of witnesses, victims, and government officials. The investigations and reporting stood in stark contrast to blanket denials of human rights violations by Contra advocates, but the reports made no headway against the influence in Washington of Cold War geopolitics. Furthermore, the Reagan administration and private Contra support organizations engaged in a campaign to delegitimize not only the human rights arguments against the Contras but also the organizations doing the reporting.

By neutralizing dissent, Reagan and Contra boosters sold the Contra operation to Congress in 1985 and 1986 as a choice between supporting individuals fighting for freedom and democracy or abandoning Nicaragua and maybe the whole of Central America to the communists. Administration officials controlled the terms of the debate and raised enough doubt about the organizations and their human rights advocacy that the human rights violations of the Contras mattered less than domestic Cold War politics. No one in Washington wanted to look soft on communism, and the voters had not yet given their representative or senator reason to deviate from this position. NGOs suffered significant setbacks as they learned to fully harness the

power of their numbers and identify arguments that could withstand Reagan's attacks. Nevertheless, the movement was bruised, and Congress bowed to Reagan with \$100 million for the Contras.

1. The Case Against the Contras

NGOs looked to build upon their success and growing influence as human rights remained a troublesome matter for Reagan's Nicaragua policy. Congressional aides and members of the House and Senate all let CFNFP representatives know that Contra human rights violations would "make it harder to renew the covert aid." CFNFP found that "[o]utrage and disgust still runs high in Capitol Hill" after the discovery of a CIA training manual teaching the Contras methods for terror, torture, and assassinations.¹ The anger in Congress had been building since the disclosure of the mining of the Nicaraguan harbors and the administration's behavior with the ICJ. Experience also left many lawmakers and aides skeptical about the administration's honesty. Human rights advocates were optimistic they could mobilize against what remained an unpopular covert operation of insurgent paramilitary forces.²

CFNFP staff determined that activists needed to exploit the plain facts—that the Contra operation had grown larger than what Congress had approved, that the CIA installed mines in the Nicaraguan harbors and produced and distributed manuals

¹ "What Are Some of the Strengths & Weaknesses of the Debate That Will Work to Our Advantage or Disadvantage as Regards Permanently Stopping the Covert Aid?," Memorandum, 1985, 11, Acc. 91A-099, Box 4, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

² A Gallup/*Newsweek* poll found that 58 percent of Americans disagreed with the United States providing the Contras assistance against the Nicaraguan government. Yet, over 60 percent of Americans approved of the overall job the president was doing. "Gallup/*Newsweek* Poll" August 1985, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research; "Presidential Job Approval: Ronald Reagan."

teaching torture, and that the Contras killed hundreds of civilians.³ NGOs anticipated that Reagan would request the release of \$14 million for covert aid in March or April of 1985. The \$14 million came from the previous year's funding bill that required a joint resolution of Congress for its release.⁴ To oppose this request, Contra aid opponents needed to defend their majority in the House. CFNFP identified eleven Democrats and seventeen Republicans who previously voted to limit funding, but who also might be swayed back to support the president's policy. Activists targeted those members with intense lobbying. Activists also wanted to keep Speaker Tip O'Neill, Majority Leader Jim Wright, Majority Whip Tom Foley (D-WA), Lee Hamilton (D-FL), and Ed Boland in their corner.⁵

The Coalition urged its members and organizations to undertake a massive public relations and media effort and do so relying on the human rights reporting by fellow NGOs. The Coalition asked activists to meet with, call, or write to those identified swing members of Congress and to call in to talk shows and write to newspapers to argue against additional Contra aid, emphasizing the threat to human rights posed by Reagan and the Contras. CFNFP instructed activists to bring up two recently-released human rights reports. WOLA and the Law Group collaborated again on a report published in March 1985. Their investigation found extensive human rights violations by the Contras and willful ignorance of the violations by U.S. officials. Also, AW published *Violations of the Laws of War by Both Sides in*

³ "What Are Some of the Strengths & Weaknesses of the Debate That Will Work to Our Advantage or Disadvantage as Regards Permanently Stopping the Covert Aid?," 11.

⁴ Sanchez, "Contra Aid: A Brief Chronology and Table Showing U.S. Assistance to the Anti-Sandinista Guerrillas (Contras) Fiscal Years 1982-1988," 2.

⁵ "Areas of Focus for Congressional Work" (Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, February 1985), 1-2, Acc. 99A-006, Box 4, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

Nicaragua 1981-1985, which found that the Sandinista government reduced its incidents of human rights violations while Contra abuses continued at a consistent rate. The Coalition wanted activists to promote these reports, distribute them to local newspapers, and request that members of Congress read them, preferably into the record.⁶

For their report, WOLA and the Law Group sent a delegation to Nicaragua in February 1985 to investigate allegations of human rights violations by both the Contras and the Nicaraguan government. However, investigators focused on the human rights violations by the Contras because abuses by the Sandinistas had been well documented, even by WOLA and the Law Group.⁷ Also, the Contras received funds from the U.S. taxpayer. The individuals leading the investigation and writing the report, Donald T. Fox and Michael J. Glennon, reasoned that “[b]ecause the United States supported the Contras in the past and is considering supporting them again, we believe that our attention was properly focused on the Contras.”⁸ Fox was a senior partner at the New York law firm of Fox, Glynn and Melamed, had served as a member of the Executive Committee of the American Association for the International Commission of Jurists, and participated in a previous human rights fact-finding mission to Guatemala. Glennon taught law at the University of Cincinnati and had been legal counsel for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

⁶ “Suggested Actions for Covert Aid Debate” (Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, January 23, 1985), 1, Acc. 91A-099, Box 4, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁷ Donald T. Fox and Michael J. Glennon, “Report of Donald T. Fox, Esq. and Prof. Michael J. Glennon to the International Human Rights Law Groups and the Washington Office on Latin America Concerning Abuses Against Civilians by Counterrevolutionaries Operating in Nicaragua” (Washington, D.C.: International Human Rights Law Group and the Washington Office on Latin America, April 1985), 1, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

The report confirmed the findings of an investigation performed by another U.S. attorney, Reed Brody, who used 145 affidavits from witnesses in Nicaragua to report on pervasive human rights violations of the Contras.⁹

The Brody Report raised serious concerns about U.S. involvement with the Contras, and WOLA and the Law Group believed that Congress needed to consider the Brody Report before approving any more funding. However, officers of both organizations acknowledged the legitimate questions about the report's credibility because of Brody's alleged connections to the Nicaraguan government. Brody did work with and received assistance from Paul Reichler, an attorney who represented the Nicaraguan government in the ICJ case against the United States, and Reichler's firm helped Brody produce the final report. Neither WOLA nor the Law Group had any familiarity with Brody, and they were reluctant to rely blindly on the report with their credibility at stake. Consequently, WOLA and the Law Group chose to conduct their own investigation.¹⁰

Fox and Glennon spent a week in Nicaragua seeking out and meeting with victims of alleged Contra abuses and with Nicaraguan opposition leaders. Fox and Glennon also met with U.S. State Department officials in Managua and Washington.¹¹ The investigation verified the claims made by Brody and uncovered "considerable evidence of abuses against civilians committed by Contra forces."¹² The investigation found the Contras attacked government and economic targets to

⁹ *Ibid.*, v.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, i-v.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, iii-v.

¹² Fox and Glennon, "Report of Donald T. Fox, Esq. and Prof. Michael J. Glennon to the International Human Rights Law Groups and the Washington Office on Latin America Concerning Abuses Against Civilians by Counterrevolutionaries Operating in Nicaragua," vi.

undermine the viability of the Nicaraguan state and economy, a strategy already widely reported in the United States and acknowledged by the president. However, these attacks often hurt or killed civilians in the process. In addition, the guerrillas conducted even more indiscriminate violence against teachers, farmers, and others with no ties to the nation's economic, political, or military well-being. These were tactics of terror and intimidation. Fox and Glennon concluded that the opposition forces acted in contravention of international law and military doctrine by committing other atrocities such as torture, kidnappings, and rape.¹³

The report also served as an indictment of U.S. officials in Nicaragua. Fox and Glennon found that State Department officials remained unaware of the abuses committed by the Contras because officials protected their ignorance and depended on others to hold information back. U.S. intelligence officers made no effort to collect data regarding the human rights violations of the Contras. State department officials also disregarded information about Contra violations.¹⁴ The investigators were incredulous, stating in their report that, “[i]f two individuals, with no governmental connections or support, during a limited visit to Nicaragua, can obtain credible evidence regarding torture and other atrocities committed by the Contras, one would hope that the Department of State and the intelligence community can do likewise.”¹⁵ Fox and Glennon recommended a Congressional investigation of the atrocities. They also called on Congress to refuse the administration's request for

¹³ Ibid., 14–17.

¹⁴ Ibid., vi, 20.

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

Contra aid and called for investigations into whether administration officials remained purposefully ignorant regarding the behavior of the Contras in the field.¹⁶

AW also investigated the Contras as a product of U.S. foreign policy and funding, publishing a study in 1985 titled *Violations of the Laws of War by Both Sides in Nicaragua, 1981-1985*. The organization asserted its traditional disclaimer that AW took no political position, and, in this case, took no position on whether the United States should fund the Contras generally. However, AW did state that the Contras engaged in systematic human rights violations, which led AW to conclude that the United States government should cease any support of the Contras until such time as those violations stop. AW confirmed that the Sandinista government did commit human rights violations, but mostly in 1981-1982. After 1982, AW noted a sharp reduction in human rights abuses by the government. In contrast, the Contras persisted in human rights abuse unabated, and AW considered the U.S. government an accomplice in the abuse because of its funding, training, and supplying of the guerrilla forces.¹⁷

In light of the Fox and Glennon and AW reports, not only did NGOs such as CFNFP want Congress to consider them, but members of Congress also wanted to take them up. Rep. George Miller (D-CA) wrote to members of the House asking that they “examine carefully the human rights aspects of the covert war against

¹⁶ Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁷ *Violations of the Laws of War by Both Sides in Nicaragua 1981-1985*, An Americas Watch Report (New York: The Americas Watch Committee, 1985).

Nicaragua,” and he enclosed with his Dear Colleague letter the AW report. Miller highlighted the disparity in abuses between the Sandinistas and Contras.¹⁸

In April 1985, the House Foreign Affairs Committee considered the administration’s request to release the \$14 million for Contra aid, and the issue of human rights in Nicaragua loomed large during the proceedings. Michael DeWine (R-OH) explained that “one of the most emotional and possibly politically telling or persuasive – or let’s say, politically damaging argument [*sic*] that is made against the United States giving aid to the Contras is the argument that the Contras are engaged in terrorist activities. They are engaged in atrocities....”¹⁹ Sam Gejdenson (D-CT) stated that “no human rights groups, no legitimate organization, no Nicaraguan organizations, nor any international human rights groups, have made any substantial allegations of human rights abuses by the Sandinista Government in recent years.” Gejdenson rejected the defense of FDN by Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Langhorne A. Motley when Motley argued that FDN’s possible human rights violations may have occurred, if at all, in the fog of war. Both the Sandinistas and Contras may have violated human rights, but Gejdenson argued that the American taxpayer should not finance the abuses.²⁰

John McCain (R-AZ) came to the Contras’ defense and distinguished organized, calculated human rights violations from the isolated incidents that happened during a war. McCain then directed the committee’s attention away from

¹⁸ George Miller to Colleague, Letter, April 18, 1985, Box 739, Jim Wright Papers. Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.

¹⁹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, *U.S. Support for the Contras: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 99th Cong., 2nd sess., 1985, 227.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 236.

incidents of war to ideology and anti-communism. He argued that the Sandinistas were “a committed band of Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries who have stated time after time, not only their intentions for their own nation, but that for their neighbors.”²¹ For lawmakers such as McCain and like-minded anti-communists, the ideology of the Sandinistas presented more of a threat to human rights than did the actions of the Contras. The anti-communists believed the Contras violated human rights, if ever, as strategy, or a justified means to a legitimate end, and that end served the long-term objective of the United States to spread democracy and freedom. Contra advocates viewed Sandinista human rights violations as systemic and part of the reason that the Contras should remain in the field.

The ranking Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Robert J. Lagomarsino (R-CA), cast doubt on the reliability of the NGOs reporting on human rights violations. He argued that one-sided human rights claims, such as those allegations of Contra human rights abuses, diminished the credibility of the NGOs investigating and reporting on human rights violations, explicitly naming Americas Watch. Lagomarsino claimed not to want to minimize the importance of investigating human rights violations, but he cautioned that learning the truth regarding the abuses presented problems. He hoped that, when evidence of Sandinista violations arose, it would not be ignored.²² The tactic of dismissing the Contra violations because there could be Sandinista violations turned into a favorite of the administration and Contra advocates.

²¹ Ibid., 237.

²² Ibid., 248-49.

Aryeh Neier, vice chairman of AW, also testified and reminded the committee that AW not only did not ignore Sandinista violations but often published reports about those violations.²³ AW reported on two episodes of mass killings by the government, one in 1981 and another in 1982, and Neier reminded the committee that AW reported on these events before anyone else. AW also investigated violations of the laws of war by both sides with its most recent report, but Neier said AW prioritized studying the Contras after the discovery of the disturbing CIA manual drafted as a code of conduct for the Contras because “we [AW] wanted to see whether the Contras had in fact been carrying out the practices that were solicited by the United States through the CIA manual.”²⁴ Much like WOLA and the Law Group, AW’s report addressed the primary concern that the United States funded groups committing human rights violations.

After publishing *Violations of the Laws of War by Both Sides*, AW sent representatives to Honduras to examine allegations from FDN of abuses by the Nicaraguan government and to investigate conditions and practices in Honduras by FDN. This new investigation revealed that both the Nicaraguan government and the Contras continued to violate the human rights of the Nicaraguan people. The forced relocations of Indians remained a continuing violation by the government. Relocation still included burning houses by the government and restrictions on locations for settlement in the relocations. People also did not have opportunity to

²³ For example, see *On Human Rights in Nicaragua*, An Americas Watch Report (New York: The Americas Watch Committee, 1982); *Human Rights in Central America: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua*, An Americas Watch Report (New York: The Americas Watch Committee, 1983).

²⁴ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee, *U.S. Support for the Contras: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 249-55.

challenge the legitimacy or necessity of the relocation policy.²⁵ AW reported that the Contras “had attacked civilians both selectively and indiscriminately, that they have tortured and mutilated prisoners, that they have murdered those placed hors de combat by their wounds, they have taken hostages and committed outrages against personal dignity.” The conduct of the Contras most troubled AW because of the political, financial, and logistical support received from the United States. Neier testified that:

[W]e believe that the role of the United States in acting as the vigorous public relations advocate of the Contras coming on top of the earlier role in organizing, supplying, training, financing the Contras and publishing the CIA manual soliciting such abuses by the Contras makes the United States significantly responsible for the systematic abuses that were committed by the Contras.²⁶

Neier called on Congress to ensure that U.S. funds and influence did not continue to aid those engaged in human rights violations.²⁷

Donald T. Fox and Reed Brody also testified regarding their respective reports. Fox reiterated his report’s conclusion that Contra forces engaged in extensive human rights abuse that U.S. officials either disregarded or purposefully ignored. Brody, a former assistant attorney general in New York, stated that he led a fact-finding mission in Nicaragua from September 1984 to January 1985 to investigate human rights abuses by the Contras. Brody based his report on eyewitness affidavits, and the evidence revealed that the Contras “engaged in a

²⁵ Ibid., 256.

²⁶ Ibid., 256.

²⁷ Ibid., 257-65.

pattern of attacks and atrocities against civilian targets. Brody and his team probed the witnesses' accounts and excluded any questionable testimony.²⁸

Human rights investigations and reporting by organizations such as AW and WOLA provided hard evidence of widespread Contra violations. The testimony further confirmed the skepticism of many in Congress regarding Reagan's policy of working with a guerrilla force in Nicaragua to undermine a sitting government. Yet, the issue remained how lawmakers in Congress and policymakers in the White House interpreted circumstances in Nicaragua as a human rights problem. The administration worked to convince lawmakers to see the presence of the FSLN as the greater threat.

2. A Campaign of Disinformation

Even with the human rights reporting and the testimony before Congress, the prevailing human rights narrative in Congress cast the Sandinistas on the side of totalitarianism and repression, leaving the armed opposition, the Contras, fighting for freedom and democracy, and, therefore, standing for human rights. Though the House would reject the president's request in April 1985 to release the \$14 million appropriated the previous year for military aid to the Contras, it reversed course in June 1985 and approved \$27 million in non-military aid. The House also rejected a new Boland Amendment for prohibiting additional aid to the Contras. The Senate

²⁸ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, *U.S. Support for the Contras: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 99th Cong., 2nd sess., 1985, 295-96, 314-15.

then agreed to the House plan.²⁹ CFNFP staff called the June vote a “stunning reversal” by Congress on the Contras.³⁰

The president acquired the political capital from his election victory in 1984 that enabled him to push through a legislative agenda, but he prevailed on the Contra issue because of the way his administration framed the question. The White House defended the conduct of the Contras, but it wanted to make the Sandinistas’ connection to communism the issue. Reagan interpreted human rights as flowing from democracy, so the Sandinistas posed the most serious threat to human rights in Nicaragua and the Western Hemisphere. The Contras, regardless of their tactics, stood for human rights by virtue of fighting the Sandinistas. Reagan and Contra supporters bolstered their argument by accusing Contra opponents of disinformation and complicity with communists.³¹ By May 1985, 73 percent of the American people did not support the president’s plan for funding the Contras through military aid and 58 percent opposed sending aid even if it was non-military.³² Reagan attributed the poor public opinion to the “drumbeat of propaganda” by Contra opponents.³³ By creating the perception that the Sandinistas aligned Nicaragua with the Soviets, that the Contras stood for democracy and human rights, and that those criticizing the

²⁹ “Hill-Reagan Contra Tug-of-War: A Chronology,” in *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, CQ Almanac Online Edition, 1988, https://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/document.php?id=cqal88-1142371#H2_1.

³⁰ “Congress Backs Contra Aid,” Legislative Update, Campaign Against U.S. Intervention (Washington, D.C.: Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, June 20, 1985), 1, Acc. 95A-074, Box 4, Latin America Working Group Records (DG 184), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

³¹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 182.

³² Louis Harris, “The Harris Survey: Almost Three-Fourth of Public Opposed Military Aid to Nicaragua,” May 23, 1985, 1–3, Box 788, Jim Wright Papers. Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.

³³ Ronald Reagan, “Monday, April 22, 1985,” in *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 231.

Contras advanced the cause of the communists, the administration won back members of Congress swayed by domestic and international Cold War politics.

The administration and its proponents published their own reports that branded the anti-Contra positions as fabrications aligned with a Sandinista-created narrative. The president believed that the Sandinistas manipulated the press and the American people and that once the Americans received the truth about the Sandinistas, they would support the Contra War effort.³⁴ In one report, appropriately titled *Sandinista Disinformation*, the State Department rejected Sandinista claims that the government did not engage in torture or widespread executions of dissidents, instead reporting that the Sandinistas learned to hide their human rights violations and mask their radical long-term planning. The Nicaraguan government engaged in summary executions of former National Guard members, and “more than eight thousand prisoners, amongst them men and women-several pregnant, were tortured and killed in the jails” of the new regime. The State Department found that Miskitos reported similar experiences. The report noted the existence of clandestine jails where government forces took people without trial and held them without the ability to communicate with anyone on the outside for weeks to months. As early as 1979, the Sandinista government planned to eliminate religious, political, and labor organizations not directly co-opted into the state and Sandinista party.³⁵

Sandinista Disinformation also disputed claims that the Nicaraguan government created the material and social improvements enjoyed by Nicaraguans,

³⁴ Reagan, *An American Life*, 479-80.

³⁵ *Sandinista Disinformation* (U.S. Department of State, Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean, 1984), 3-16.

undercutting the argument that the Sandinistas stood for social and economic rights for Nicaraguans. Rather, any gains in social services or the standard of living came with the fall of Somoza when a coalition of groups worked together in governing. The administration argued that programs eroded as the coalition broke apart in 1980 and 1981. The new health system, touted as a success by FSLN proponents and part of the expansive bundle of human rights guaranteed by the Nicaraguan state, had widely failed, according to the Reagan administration. *Sandinista Disinformation* also disputed the success of the literacy program, in large part because the Nicaraguan government used an inexact and subjective method to measure the ability to read and write for determining success in reducing literacy. The number of people attending schools fluctuated wildly and education turned into more of a political indoctrination by the FSLN. The report also refuted the Sandinista claim that economic problems came from the “counter-revolution, the reactionary bourgeoisie, and US imperialism” by countering that financial problems came from poor administration of the Sandinista government. The State Department asserted that the Sandinistas abandoned the national reconstruction programs that a diverse number of organizations had supported and that the party alienated its supporters in the United States and other countries through its policies.³⁶

The Heritage Foundation, an NGO and ally of the administration, published a report in October 1984 to undercut the credibility of WOLA, accusing WOLA of participating in a “cottage industry” that dominated the discussion on foreign policy with Central America. The Heritage Foundation also found WOLA “openly hostile”

³⁶ Ibid., 19–24.

to U.S. objectives and actions in the region.³⁷ The report claimed that “the leftist information brokers on Latin America seem interested exclusively in exposing rights violations in countries backed by the U.S. [such as El Salvador] while neglecting violations in leftist regimes [such as Nicaragua].”³⁸ The Heritage Foundation argued that WOLA held a special place among the hierarchy of groups practicing hypocrisy in human rights advocacy.

WOLA is probably viewed as the Latin American information broker closest to the Washington political mainstream. Yet WOLA coordinates much of its efforts with such openly radical leftist groups as the Institute for Policy Studies; it shares their tendency to ignore or minimize abuses in socialist countries, while attacking the rights violations in U.S.- backed countries.

The report noted WOLA’s objective to influence lawmakers through publications, human rights reporting, and testimony before Congress.³⁹

The Heritage Foundation also claimed obvious bias in the organizational structure of WOLA through its funding sources. The United Methodist board of Global Ministries paid the salary of Joe Eldridge, but the United Methodist Board also provided funding to the Nicaragua Network, an organization that only supported the FSLN.⁴⁰ The report argued that Eldridge did not criticize the Cuban government because the Cubans did not receive support from the U.S. government. WOLA claimed to take action only against those who received U.S. support while committing human rights violations. However, the Heritage Foundation found that

³⁷ Joan Frawley, “The Left’s Latin American Lobby,” *The Institution Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, October 11, 1984), 1, Folder Attacks (*80s), Box 25, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

Eldridge's reasoning for WOLA's actions "fails to answer why WOLA is such a sharp critic of authoritarian governments and so lenient toward socialist regimes."⁴¹

WOLA's selective criticism and view of human rights seemed to indicate, according to the Heritage Foundation, a pro-socialist agenda within the progressive NGOs opposing the Contras. The Heritage Foundation rejected the premise that Contra human rights violations could be an issue. The real issue was WOLA's politics.

The administration went so far as to deny or ignore human rights violations by the Contras. In a hearing before the House Western Hemisphere Affairs Subcommittee, Rep. C. W. Bill Young (R-FL) wanted to discuss with administration officials the allegations contained in the WOLA-Law Group and AW reports. Young wanted to know from the witness, Langhorne A. Motley, whether the NGOs raised legitimate claims against the Contras given the extent of their evidence. Motley brushed the concerns aside, arguing that measuring the abuses by either side proved difficult, but he also said of human rights violations by the Contras, "I think candidly it is a sidebar issue." Clair E. George, deputy director for operations at CIA, expressed a similar ambivalence and just denied the claims of Contra human rights violations. George found that those allegations came from a propaganda campaign organized by the Sandinistas and the insurgent forces in El Salvador and facilitated by the communication channels of the Soviets and Cubans in a campaign that had deceived the media in the United States.⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid., 7.

⁴² U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on the Department of Defense of the Committee on Appropriations, *Department of Defense Appropriations for 1986: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on the Department of Defense of the Committee on Appropriations*, 99th Cong., 1st sess., 1985, 1139-40.

The denial and misdirection by Motley and George represented a new strategy of the Reagan administration. In a unique publication, AW focused on the language and use of human rights by the administration to build support for the Contras. AW examined human rights violations by both the Sandinista government and the Contras while comparing Reagan's rhetoric against the evidence. From its work investigating human rights in Nicaragua, AW rejected claims that the Sandinistas adopted a "systematic practice of forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings or torture." The report also disputed the characterization of claims the Sandinistas limited political speech, arguing that "debate on major social and political questions is robust, outspoken, even often strident." Contrary to Reagan's claim that the Sandinistas failed to hold free elections in 1984, AW argued that the 1984 election represented a major step forward for democracy in Nicaragua and compared closely with elections held in Mexico, Panama, and Guatemala.⁴³

AW agreed with the Reagan administration that the Sandinistas had committed human rights violations and that the United States should act with other nations to hold the Nicaraguan regime accountable for those actions. However, AW argued that "unless those abuses are fairly described, the debate on Nicaragua ceases to have meaning."⁴⁴ In addition to objecting to the inflammatory language used by Reagan against the Nicaraguan government and Daniel Ortega, AW strongly opposed the administration's use of the word "totalitarian" in reference to the Nicaraguan government, calling it "a misuse of the term" that "misrepresents the situation in

⁴³ "Human Rights in Nicaragua: Reagan, Rhetoric and Reality," Press Release (Americas Watch, July 15, 1985), 3, Acc. 99A-006, Box 3, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 4.

Nicaragua.” Independent institutions continued to exist in Nicaragua, as did voices of vigorous dissent, none of which would exist in a totalitarian state.⁴⁵

With respect to the Contras, the report affirmed that, during the previous two years, the Contras committed “the most violent abuses of human rights in Nicaragua,” while the United States, through the Reagan administration, abdicated its moral leadership. “[W]e find that contra combatants systematically murder the unarmed, including medical personnel; rarely take prisoners; and force civilians into collaboration. These abuses have become a rallying point inside Nicaragua.” The Reagan administration gave a “distorted” picture of human rights in Nicaragua through State Department reports and other administration publications, press releases, speeches, and the president’s own public statements. “Such a misuse of human rights to justify military interference in U.S.-Latin American relations” represented “an unprecedented debasement of the human rights cause.”⁴⁶ While the Contras continued to commit human rights violations, the administration chose “not to pressure contra leaders to enforce international codes of conduct, but to drown U.S. public opinion with praise for the ‘freedom fighters,’ and to attempt to discredit all reports of their violations as inspired by communist or Sandinista propaganda.” The administration would also reject critics of its Nicaragua policies as incapable of understanding the circumstances of Nicaragua.⁴⁷ Officials would also make efforts to delegitimize the Contra critics by accusing them of a disinformation campaign meant to smear the reputation of the freedom fighters and deceive the American people.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4–7.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 9, 13

⁴⁷ Ibid., 73.

Under the weight of human rights arguments and distrust for the administration's approach to Nicaragua, the president's proposal for \$14 million in aid failed to win support in Congress. Democrats in the House voted against the bill in April 1985 believing they could provide aid through an alternative measure that would help refugees in the region while eliminating military funding for the Contras. Republicans sought more military aid for the Contras, and liberal Democrats, persuaded by the human rights arguments against the violence and violations of Nicaraguan sovereignty from U.S. intervention, voted against any aid to the Contras.

It looked like another victory for NGOs and Contra opponents until Daniel Ortega brought Cold War geopolitics back to the foreground. In April 1985, Ortega landed in Moscow looking for financial support from the Soviets. His trip embarrassed the Democrats and seemed to confirm the president's warnings that Nicaragua had allied with the Soviets. Reagan claimed that the Democrats had fallen victim to the Sandinista disinformation campaign.⁴⁸ The mood in the House changed, creating a new opening for securing at least non-lethal aid for the Contras.⁴⁹ Representative Dave McCurdy (D-OK), chair of the House Intelligence Committee, wanted to build a unified coalition behind a Nicaragua policy that consisted of clear objectives the American people could support, not what he considered the ill-defined and secretive plan of the administration. McCurdy could not accept Washington abandoning "the brave men and women of the democratic center in Nicaragua... struggling, both from within and from exile, for the freedoms for which they waged a

⁴⁸ "Alternative in the Works: Stage Is Being Set for Congress to Renew Debate on 'Contras,'" *Congressional Quarterly*, May 18, 1985, Box 8, Dave McCurdy Collection, 1981-1996, Carl Albert Center Archives.

⁴⁹ "Alternative in the Works: Stage Is Being Set for Congress to Renew Debate on 'Contras.'"

valiant revolution in 1979.” His objectives included producing a ceasefire, ending the trade embargo and provocative military maneuvers, renewing the bilateral talks with the Nicaraguans, and supporting the Contadora peace process.⁵⁰

McCurdy’s funding proposal provided \$27 million in humanitarian aid to the Contras that the CIA would not distribute, and the president had to submit to the intelligence committees a report detailing the human rights violations by the Nicaraguan government and the Contras. The Boland Amendment would remain in place to limit the use of the money.⁵¹ McCurdy assured his colleagues that the funding proposal’s language “specifically prohibits furnishing weapons, weapons systems, ammunition, or other lethal equipment, vehicles or material.”⁵² McCurdy argued that this proposal put the United States and the Nicaraguans on a path toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict rather than having the United States walk away from the turmoil and the struggle of the Contras and the Nicaraguan people.⁵³

Reagan wrote to McCurdy to offer his “strongest support” for the bipartisan proposal. The president assured McCurdy that he intended to pursue a political solution to the conflict rather than a military end and that his administration would support those groups seeking democracy in Nicaragua and the rest of Central America. The president also affirmed that his administration did not want to overthrow the Nicaraguan government or return to power any remnants of the Somoza regime, namely the National Guard. Reagan sought a national reconciliation

⁵⁰ Dave McCurdy, “Support the ‘Democratic Center,’” *The Washington Post*, June 9, 1985, Box 8, Dave McCurdy Collection, 1981-1996, Carl Albert Center Archives.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Dave McCurdy, et al., to Colleagues, Letter to Colleagues, June 6, 1985, 1, Box 8, Dave McCurdy Collection, 1981-1996, Carl Albert Center Archives.

⁵³ McCurdy, “Support the ‘Democratic Center.’”

in Nicaragua through the democratic process and argued that the United States needed to continue supporting democratic forces within Nicaragua to push the Sandinistas to accept a democratically based national reconciliation.⁵⁴ Congress and the president now looked to be moving in the same direction on a clearly defined Nicaragua policy based on the Democratic Human Rights discourse and anti-communism. The Contras were the vehicle to carry out a key part of that policy.

The president addressed the nation's specific concerns about human rights, declaring that the "U.S. condemns, in the strongest possible terms, atrocities by either side."⁵⁵ He stated that the administration would help the democratic resistance apply rules of engagement in war and rules for the treatment of prisoners and civilians, and the administration would push the Contras to investigate allegations of human rights violations. The president also promised to consult with the Central American nations and Contadora participants to determine the best way for resuming bilateral talks with the Nicaraguan government.⁵⁶

Reagan's letter to McCurdy bolstered the confidence of Southern Democrats, an important bloc of votes to pass the proposal.⁵⁷ WOLA determined that the concessions from Reagan regarding non-military use and cutting out the CIA mattered less to representatives than the fear of critics labeling Democrats as soft on communism. Members of Congress also shared McCurdy's view that they did not

⁵⁴ Ronald Reagan to Dave McCurdy, Letter, June 11, 1985, 1, Alfonso Robelo C. Papers, Box 6, Hoover Institution Archives.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁷ "The U.S. Congress Authorizes Aid to Contras," *Latin America Update*, August 1985, p. 3, Box 30, Folder: WOLA [Early docs] 2 of 2, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

want to abandon the effort and the Contras in Nicaragua.⁵⁸ As James R. Jones (R-OK) argued on the floor of the House, lawmakers considered renewed funding to the Contras as fulfilling the moral obligation of the United States to provide aid to refugees and to stem the tide of human rights abuses. He argued that the Contras stood for freedom and democracy.⁵⁹

NGOs assessed the approval of Contra aid in June 1985 as a reinterpretation of human rights through the prism of Cold War geopolitics without regard for conditions on the ground in Nicaragua. Conservatives and moderates in Congress felt anxious about the lack of clear direction over Nicaragua policy after the first rejection of funding bills in the spring. Also, just as Contra opponents did the previous year in the wake of the mining incident, the administration took advantage of changing circumstances in Nicaragua to discredit the Sandinistas and build support for the Contras. Ortega's trip to Moscow in late April was a symbolic moment that dramatically undermined the anti-Contra position by confirming for many in Washington their fears of Managua-Moscow-Havana collaboration.⁶⁰ WOLA determined that Ortega's Moscow trip swung the "pendulum in the House" back toward Contra funding.⁶¹ Many Democrats who voted against Contra aid in past votes felt insulted by the Ortega trip and voted for the Contras in summer 1985. Others who

⁵⁸ "Washington in Focus" (Washington, D.C.: Washington Office on Latin America, June 27, 1985), p. 4, Box 30, Folder: WOLA [Early docs] 2 of 2, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

⁵⁹ James R. Jones, 99th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 131, p. 11, 15403.

⁶⁰ "Congress Backs Contra Aid," Legislative Update, Campaign Against U.S. Intervention (Washington, D.C.: Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, June 20, 1985), p. 1, Acc. 95A-074, Box 4, Latin America Working Group Records (DG 184), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁶¹ "Washington in Focus" (Washington, D.C.: Washington Office on Latin America, June 27, 1985), p. 1, Box 30, Folder: WOLA [Early docs] 2 of 2, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

believed in supporting the Contras used the Ortega trip as the excuse to justify to constituents why they flipped their vote and supported an unpopular policy.⁶²

The human rights argument now tilted in Reagan's favor as Congress reinterpreted human rights to fit changing circumstances and perceived threats. The arguments of AW notwithstanding, lawmakers in Washington saw a totalitarian regime and its systemic violations of human rights lurking in Nicaragua, which presented a greater threat than did the troublesome Contras. The complex arguments of human rights NGOs refuting the allegations of disinformation, debunking the charges of human rights violations against the Sandinistas, and illuminating the administration's imprecise use of terms failed to hold up to a simplifying Cold War narrative. Cindy Buhl of CFNFP reasoned that human rights activists lost "the debate" because they could not stop the administration from framing the question around fears over communism spreading and fears over standing against Reagan with 1986 mid-term elections looming. She also noted that many members of Congress did believe that supporting the Contras pressured the Sandinistas to negotiate in good faith through Contadora. Going forward, she hoped to "recapture the debate" and address those fears that motivated the votes of summer 1985.⁶³

⁶² "The U.S. Congress Authorizes Aid to Contras," *Latin America Update*, August 1985, p. 3, Box 30, Folder: WOLA [Early docs] 2 of 2, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

⁶³ Cindy Buhl to Friend Concerned about Central America, "Update on Protecting the Boland Amendment and Reversing the Momentum in Congress to Aid and Support the Nicaraguan Contras," Letter, July 10, 1985, p. 1, Acc. 92A-042, Box 6, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

3. A Foundation of Doubt in Human Rights

Like WOLA and AW, the Nicaraguan Network and CFNFP also worked toward correcting the human rights record but did so through grassroots activism and lobbying delegations. National human rights organizations supplied their membership with information and techniques to combat what they determined was a false narrative put forward by the White House. NGOs cited what they believed was ample evidence of Contra atrocities and the moral authority of peace in their efforts to win over the American people and members of Congress. Yet, Contra proponents continued their assault on the credibility of any individual or organization questioning the mission of anti-Sandinista forces, sowing seeds of doubt regarding the truth and purpose of human rights reports. Furthermore, allegations of Contra misconduct received not just denials but also prompted accusations of hypocrisy against those who would accuse the Contras of abuse while failing to do the same against the Sandinistas.

The Sandinistas did not help their own case in Washington with Ortega's trip to the Soviet Union in April and then adopting new restrictions on Nicaraguans' freedom in October. Ortega announced a new State of Emergency and suspended civil liberties, such as the right to a fair and speedy trial, freedom of movement, free press, free expression, right of assembly, right to form associations and unions, right to strike, and right of habeas corpus.⁶⁴ The law also maintained previously enacted restrictions on civil liberties.⁶⁵ State police informed opposition leader Mario

⁶⁴ George P. Shultz, "Chronology of Events, Nicaragua, Part 1" (Washington, D.C., November 14, 1986), 4, Digital National Security Archive.

⁶⁵ "From Revolution to Repression," 1.

Rappaccioli that his party must stop printing and distributing its monthly newsletter. In addition, Vice President Sergio Ramirez announced that all civic organizations had to obtain government approval before organizing or the government would categorize the non-complying organizations as illegal.⁶⁶

Ramirez claimed that the new State of Emergency measures prevented “the ‘enemy’ from turning to sabotage, terrorism, and demoralization and confusion of the public” and he condemned “open, cynical and insolent political activity.”⁶⁷ Security forces took political opposition leaders to interrogation centers and warned other Nicaraguans to stop all political activities or they would also be detained and interrogated.⁶⁸ Lino Hernández, the head of the Comisión Permanente de Derechos Humanos (CPDH), an independent Nicaraguan human rights commission, informed the U.S. embassy that the Ministry of the Interior had summoned him to bring all communications to its office for censorship. “The unquestionable effect of the requirement, Hernandez emphasized, would be that no [Nicaraguan government] abuses of human rights would be publicized, since CPDH is the only office [based in Nicaragua] that prepares human rights reports.” The embassy requested that the State Department contact other organizations concerned about human rights, such as Americas Watch, and tell them about the Ministry’s request of CPDH.⁶⁹

The new State of Emergency bolstered White House arguments that Sandinistas constructed a totalitarian state, but the Nicaragua Network moved to

⁶⁶ Shultz, “Chronology of Events, Nicaragua, Part 1,” 6.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 6–7.

⁶⁹ Harry E. Bergold Jr., “GON Plans to Censor CPDH Publications,” Cable, November 15, 1985, 2, Digital National Security Archive.

counter these arguments and turn the accusations back on Reagan. The Nicaragua Network acknowledged that the State of Emergency did take away “fundamental rights” from individuals and organizations. Yet the 1985 law followed two previous State of Emergency laws, one in 1979 and another that lasted from 1982 to 1984, and the Nicaraguan government had relaxed the restrictions of the second State of Emergency in 1984 to facilitate national elections. The Nicaragua Network argued that this new State of Emergency did not include the same level of restrictions as the 1982-1984 law. Furthermore, the 1985 State of Emergency law did not come from a Sandinista plan to pursue greater repression or some alliance with the Soviets.⁷⁰

The Nicaragua Network advised that the new law arose as a consequence of the destabilization efforts by the United States. Actions such as the CIA-directed missions of sabotage, mining the harbors, training and arming the Contras, engaging in an economic blockade and undermining attempts by the state to obtain credit from international lending institutions, obstruction in the International Court of Justice, undermining free election process, and attempts to obstruct the Contadora peace process all created circumstances in which the Nicaraguan officials moved to defend the state and would continue to do so.⁷¹ The organization downplayed the significance of the law, claiming that “[s]tate of emergency restrictions have always been used responsibly in Nicaragua, as a legal and juridical means of dealing with criminal sabotage activities. There is no reason to believe application of the latest

⁷⁰ “Nicaragua Declares State of Emergency” (Nicaragua Network, 1985), 1-2, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 3, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

measures will vary.” The organization also downplayed the degree of influence these measures would have on everyday life in Nicaragua.⁷²

A talking points memo for activists, drafted by David Reed of the Nicaragua Network and Reggie Norton of WOLA, further clarified arguments to counter common accusations against the Sandinista regime. Instead of the State of Emergency representing another step toward totalitarianism in Nicaragua, for instance, the Sandinista government still offered more freedom to Nicaraguans than did the Somoza regime, and many fundamental civil liberties remained untouched. Reed and Norton also called the emergency measures “normal to expect from a small country at war. 11,000 Nicaraguans have died due to the U.S.-sponsored war.” Nicaraguan officials feared that the CIA would penetrate the country’s social and political structure and create subversion from the inside, which was what the Sandinistas believed the CIA did against Salvador Allende in Chile. The emergency measures came in response to recent Contra attacks that targeted economic infrastructure, a particularly troubling development for Nicaragua when the country already suffered economic isolation by the United States. Furthermore, Reed and Norton explained that the Sandinistas believed additional funding for the Contras would lead to a new wave of attacks and sabotage activities to obstruct the coffee harvest and oil and industrial production along the Pacific and in Managua.⁷³

Even as the Nicaraguan government seemed to some to shut down freedom for its people, Reed and Norton argued that the country moved in the right direction.

⁷² Ibid., 3.

⁷³ David Reed and Reggie Norton, “Talking Points on Nicaragua’s Broadening of Emergency Measures” (Nicaragua Network, October 1985), 2-3, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 3, Wisconsin Historical Society.

The Nicaraguan government remained committed to political pluralism, non-alignment, and a mixed economy, despite the poor economic conditions facing the nation and the violence and political subversion instigated by the United States. “Nicaragua’s Constitutional Development process and Atlantic Coast Autonomy projects continue unchanged complete with widespread grassroots consultations.”⁷⁴ Evidence did not point to the Sandinistas as the human rights problem in Nicaragua but part of the solution.

As the Nicaragua Network and WOLA supplied its activist memberships with rhetorical tools, the Nicaragua Network also coordinated with other organizations to strengthen its effort to counteract the hesitation in Congress. “We, as the solidarity movement, working together with other progressive forces, can bolster our allies and try to exacerbate the split among policy makers over U.S. policy toward Nicaragua.” Several strategies began taking shape in 1985 and grew stronger and more influential over several years, to the point that members of Congress appealed to the NGOs for support. The Nicaragua Network would engage in close collaboration with organizations such as WOLA and CFNFP. NGOs would conduct informational seminars to educate Congressional staff members, visit the offices of swing voters, and work to establish good relationships with liberal members of Congress. NGOs hoped to serve as important sources of information regarding conditions and politics in Nicaragua.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁵ “The 1986 Stop Contra Aid Campaign” (Nicaragua Network, 1985), 5, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 3, Wisconsin Historical Society.

One such collaboration was the Stop Contra Aid Campaign. Debbie Reuben of the Nicaraguan Network announced that the organization expected that Reagan would request \$100 million in military aid for the Contras, and the issue would be before Congress by March or April 1986. Consequently, NGOs formed the 1986 Stop Contra Aid Campaign to coordinate grassroots activism throughout the nation and to organize regional and local committees for lobbying members of Congress.⁷⁶ CFNFP sent out information and organizing packets to approximately five hundred grassroots contacts. CFNFP helped organize phone banks for ten swing Congressional districts and sent mailings to contacts within those districts. Twenty states held events as part of the campaign called Central America Week. Field organizers in CFNFP targeted Democratic states in the South that NGOs believed held key districts for a Contra aid vote.⁷⁷ A plaque still sits on a wall close to the University of Oklahoma in Norman commemorating Central America Week on March 17-24.

By the end of 1985, CFNFP understood that grassroots organizing and lobbying could have a significant impact on the human rights and anti-Contra movement. CFNFP leadership looked to take a larger role in coordinating national grassroots activism while continuing to develop an effective lobbying presence in Washington. To carry out its move, CFNFP transitioned to HRWG the organization's planning and execution of human rights advocacy and the role of

⁷⁶ Debbie Reuben, Sylvia Sherman, and David Reed, Letter, January 10, 1986, 1, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 3, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁷⁷ "Staff Meeting" (Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, February 3, 1986), 1, Acc. 92A-042, Box 1, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

analyzing trends in human rights policy. Leadership wanted to focus the human rights operations within such a working group to provide more consistent, long-term direction for Contra opposition and mobilization.⁷⁸ Fact-based analysis and testimony in Washington seemed to matter less than the red-baiting and claims of disinformation by the president and Contra supporters. NGOs anticipated mass mobilization would counter that. They did not yet have the organizational infrastructure, and the administration and Contra supporters continued the attacks that not only branded NGOs as complicit in a communist takeover of Central America but also tried to undermine human rights reporting and human rights-based dissent.

The attack on the legitimacy of human rights arguments of NGOs continued in early 1986 in anticipation of Reagan's \$100 million funding request, turning more aggressive and spreading among conservative media outlets. Rep. Vin Weber (R-MN) sent to members of Congress an article from *The New Republic* that falsely reported that human rights groups, such as AW and WOLA, operated as part of a Sandinista-coordinated lobbying effort.⁷⁹ In "The Sandinista Lobby," Fred Barnes accused WOLA and AW of disregarding the human rights violations of the Nicaraguan government and focusing on the Contras, which revealed the organizational bias. "This indifference to... evidence of systematic abuses of human rights was not a lapse," Barnes alleged. "On the contrary, it reflects the selective

⁷⁸ "Policy Proposal for the Coalition for a New Foreign Policy 1986-1990" (Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, 1986), 3, Acc. 90A-113, Box 21, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁷⁹ Vin Weber, Dear Colleague Letter, January 23, 1986, Latin American Strategic Studies Institute papers, Box 5, Hoover Institution Archives.

moral indignation of a phalanx of organizations in Washington that regularly criticizes the Reagan administration's policy toward Central America and, in particular, Nicaragua.”⁸⁰ Barnes also hammered away at NGOs for their hypocrisy in attacking Guatemala, El Salvador, and the Contras, yet seeming to have no interest in reporting on the Nicaraguan government's human rights violations. Barnes falsely charged CFNFP as one of the most “forgiving” of NGOs and the “umbrella group” of the human rights organizations devoted to defending the Sandinista government. The article identified the Contras as no longer a small band of former National Guard members, as portrayed by NGOs, but a force of at least fifteen thousand led by anti-Somoza statesmen such as Arturo Cruz and Alfonso Robelo.⁸¹ A week later, an editorial in the *Tampa Tribune* followed the lead of Barnes and called WOLA “a member of an umbrella group of Sandinista apologists organized as the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, known as ‘the community’.”⁸²

The assault on the work by human rights organizations disturbed activists because it risked destabilizing institutions that held governments around the world accountable for their conduct, and it possibly endangered those investigating human rights conditions. Holly Burkhalter of AW testified in early 1986 before the House Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs about the danger of the administration misrepresenting and undermining human rights reporting. Burkhalter criticized the administration for the

⁸⁰ Fred Barnes, “The Sandinista Lobby: ‘Human Rights’ Groups with a Double Standard,” *The New Republic*, January 20, 1986, 11, Latin American Strategic Studies Institute papers, Box 5, Hoover Institution Archives.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁸² “Color Them Red,” *Tampa Tribune*, January 28, 1986, Folder Attacks (’80s), Box 25, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

language in its own report referring to human rights groups as “leftists” or “subversive” because they reported on governments friendly to the United States. She argued that this language against well-respected organizations “not only undermines their efforts but can threaten their lives” in nations pursuing policies of violence against leftist groups or facing insurgencies. “I might also say that the Reagan administration’s recent statements about a disinformation campaign on Nicaragua are really a low point, in terms of rhetoric about human rights groups, or peace groups.” She argued that that conduct by the administration undermined dissent and efforts of legitimate human rights organizations. Furthermore, she took issue with Elliott Abrams writing an op-ed in *The New York Times* on February 22, 1985, in which he called a columnist, Anthony Lewis, un-American for his criticism of US policy in Central America. Burkhalter argued that disagreeing with Reagan’s policies did not equate to subversion or anti-American activities, that the human rights organizations “are not engaged in disinformation. They are trying to do a job, and in some cases they are trying to do a job at the risk of their own lives.”⁸³

Even Amnesty International increasingly found itself on the receiving end of attempts to delegitimize its reporting, which led AI to take a confrontational approach with the Reagan administration and support the work of other NGOs in the United States. AI had long publicly stated that it took no position on politics or leadership decisions within governments or international organizations and remained neutral on non-governmental military forces because AI considered its mission as

⁸³ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, *U.S. Human Rights Policy: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 99th Cong., 2nd sess., 1986, 23-24.

pressuring governments to make changes.⁸⁴ A memo circulated among the board of directors by Ann Blyberg that discussed strategy in addressing attacks leveled against AI from the Reagan administration, while also mentioning that AI had not received the volume of attacks received by other NGOs. Blyberg suggested that AI's reputation, established through an emphasis on balance and impartiality, helped AI avoid the kinds of attacks suffered by other organizations, but she expected problems in the future from President Reagan. She anticipated that AI, in addition to "Americas Watch, WOLA, and others," would be targets of an increasing number of attacks from administration officials, supporters, or surrogates, and she wanted to start addressing the situation rather than allow the threats to take down other NGOs before the administration fully set its sights on AI.⁸⁵ Blyberg argued that AI needed to "meet this challenge... aggressively" by asserting "that which is the basis of our own identity - international human rights law."⁸⁶

Blyberg explained that Reagan had redefined human rights as opposition to communism and the Soviet Union. The administration then shaped the human rights debate and analysis within this framework, rejecting interpretations of human rights formed outside of Cold War geopolitical considerations and U.S. strategic objectives. She argued that, if the Reagan administration successfully reshaped conceptions of

⁸⁴ "Amnesty International Reports on Human Rights Abuses in Nicaragua," Press Release (London, UK: Amnesty International, February 12, 1986), 1, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc., National Office Records, 1966-2003: Box IV.1.6.260, Nicaragua 1983-1987, folder 9, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

⁸⁵ Ann Blyberg to Jack Hesley, Paul Ford, and Paul Hoffman, "Re: AIUSA Program Vis-a-Vis the U.S. Government - Education on International Human Rights Law," Memorandum, February 23, 1986, 1, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc.: National Office Records, Box II.3 38, Executive Directory Files Healey United States Government Work 1984-1993, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

human rights, “AI’s ability, or the ability of any international human rights organization, to affect the behavior of governments will then be seriously eroded, as our effectiveness depends very much on the existence of this consensus to shame governments into treating their citizens fairly and decently.” Blyberg suggested that the administration tried to redefine the public’s conception of human rights and to undermine those organizations, such as AI, that did not follow the Democratic Human Rights discourse.⁸⁷

The administration delegitimized human rights organizations, such as AI, that brought human rights violations to light by claiming that such organizations undermined democracy. Blyberg found that NGOs reporting on human rights abuses in Central America, including WOLA, Americas Watch, and now AI, received the strongest attacks and attempts to publicly discredit them. No right took supremacy over others. Nor did the international community or the human rights consensus built up since World War II agree that combatting terrorism or communism justified human rights abuses.⁸⁸

Blyberg added that AI needed the contributions of other human rights organizations because AI’s work focused on certain rights and purposefully remained limited in its work. Other NGOs, such as WOLA, engaged in other human rights work just as necessary as the work of AI. Attacking the legitimacy of human rights work by NGOs undermined the mission of all human rights NGOs. Blyberg proposed that AI should take stronger positions on issues of international human

⁸⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 3-5.

rights law and do more to defend other NGOs.⁸⁹ AI typically tried to maintain a separation from other NGOs, except in certain circumstances when interests aligned.⁹⁰

Activists among the various NGOs saw serious threats not only to human rights but the continued existence of the organizations and the ability to create change. NGOs organized with greater urgency against the challenges as the administration cashed in on its successful strategy. The work done between 1984 and early 1986 to delegitimize human rights-based dissent laid the foundation for the administration's ultimate legislative achievement of the Contra War. Reagan secured an appropriation for \$100 million for the Contras. This achievement represented the height of Reagan's power as president and influence in shaping impressions of human rights in the United States with respect to Nicaragua.

4. A Defeat of Anticolonial Human Rights

President Reagan's success in gaining \$100 million dollars in Contra funding demonstrated the influence of the Democratic Human Rights discourse on U.S. Nicaragua policy. Regardless of the investigations, testimony, and evidence presented by NGOs as respected as AW and AI, opposition to the president's Nicaragua policy did not stand up to this Cold War view of human rights. Nor did the reports and testimony about the Contras move the human rights focus away from

⁸⁹ Ibid., 5-7.

⁹⁰ Secretary General's Office to All Sections, "Amnesty International and Other Organizations," Memorandum, September 5, 1986, 2, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc.: National Office Records, Box I.1 10, 13-15 Jan 1989 1, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

the Sandinistas, thanks in large part to the campaign to undermine those NGOs publishing negative assessments of the Contras. When Ortega visited the Soviet Union and then implemented restrictive State of Emergency laws, even if done in self-defense, the administration had an even easier time undercutting opponents of Contra funding. According the president, “you can’t be against the Contras without being for the Communist government of Nicaragua.”⁹¹ The choice should have been easy.

In February 1986, the administration delivered to Congress its request for Contra funding. Reagan declared that the peace negotiations in Central America had failed and, should Washington do nothing, the Soviet-backed Sandinistas would strengthen their position and wipe out opposition forces, “spreading subversion and terrorism in our hemisphere.”⁹² Pursuant to the proposal, the president could use most of the funds in any way he saw appropriate, military or otherwise. Should the Sandinistas and Contras reach a peaceful resolution, the administration would transition the money to relief and reconstruction missions. The request eliminated all restrictions on the use, purpose, and distribution of the funds and gave the CIA and Department of Defense the ability to administer funds and carry out missions in furtherance of Reagan’s policies.⁹³

⁹¹ Ronald Reagan to Laurence W. Beilenson, Letter, December 10, 1986, in *Reagan, A Life in Letters*, eds. Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson (New York: Free Press, 2003), 471.

⁹² U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua: Aid to Nicaraguan Resistance Proposal: Hearings Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, 99th Cong., 2nd sess., 120.

⁹³ “Summary of President’s Request to Congress on Aid to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance,” Fact Sheet (Washington, D.C.: The White House, Office of the Press Secretary., February 25, 1986), 1-2, Box 739, Jim Wright Papers. Special Collections, Mary Couets Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.

White House officials did believe human rights still influenced how members of Congress assessed relations with Nicaragua and remained a key issue for promoting the new funding request. The White House built into the proposal an allocation of \$30 million for humanitarian assistance that included strengthening the observance and defense of human rights in Nicaragua. Furthermore, the president claimed that additional funding for the “Nicaraguan democratic resistance” enabled them to continue fighting for democracy in Nicaragua and the Western Hemisphere. The Contras fought for the United States and if the United States failed to continue providing the resources to continue that fight, according to Reagan, it risked undermining human rights and creating a potential for greater sacrifice in the future to protect freedom.⁹⁴

When Senator Jim Sasser (R-TN) formally proposed the \$100 million funding bill to the Senate in March 1986, he referenced his conversations with Central American leaders who hoped the United States could take “bold new steps.” Sasser acknowledged that the Contras did not instill confidence in lawmakers, but he argued that “[a]s unpalatable as the Contras are, they are the only source of external pressure that is appropriate at this time in the region. And, although it has, thus far, failed to produce results, Contadora remains the best forum for achieving lasting peace.” Sasser proposed \$30 million in nonlethal aid for the Contras and \$70 million in military aid, but the military aid would be kept in escrow to be released after 6 months while the administration continued to pursue a negotiated settlement.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Ibid., 122-125.

⁹⁵ James Sasser, on March 4, 1986, 99th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 132, pt. 3:3485.

Representatives Peter H. Kostmayer (D-PA), James M. Jeffords (R-VT), and Edward F. Feighan (D-OH) still did not accept this argument and quickly called on the president to withdraw his proposal in light of the damaging reports from organizations such as WOLA. They requested a full investigation into the allegations, and they wanted the funding proposal withdrawn until that investigation could be completed, arguing that, absent a full inquiry into the conduct of the guerrillas in Nicaragua, “the American people and the Congress cannot make an informed decision about the direction of U.S. policy in Nicaragua.” “Regardless of our efforts to encourage greater freedom and full democracy in Nicaragua,” they added, “the thrust of American policy and the use of American taxpayers’ dollars must never be used to support heinous and vicious human rights abuses.”⁹⁶ Kostmayer, Jeffords, and Feighan separated the issue of whether the Sandinistas allied themselves with the Soviets from that of the United States funding indiscriminate violence and terrorism in Nicaragua.

Administration allies in Congress went in the opposite direction, arguing that only the Contras stood for human rights in Nicaragua. Robert H. Michel (R-IL) wrote to fellow Republicans claiming that “aid to the Contras is the only position that offers a chance for improved human rights” because the Sandinistas had such an abysmal record on that front. Michel framed the issue as a question of whether Congress would give in to communists. A vote against the aid proposal acquiesced to “total domination of Nicaragua by an avowed Marxist-Leninist Sandinista group

⁹⁶ Peter Kostmayer, James M. Jeffords, and Edward F. Feighan to George P. Shultz, Letter, February 19, 1986, Box 20, Human Rights Report re Nicaragua 3 of 3 1985-1987, Patricia Murphy Derian Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

whose policy... has been openly and proudly Communist.” Michel also dismissed allegations of Contra human rights violations as “ridiculous” and a story cooked up by Contra opponents.⁹⁷

Many in both chambers of Congress remained skeptical about the Contra operation and did not allow the White House to distract them from the opposition forces in Nicaragua. During a committee hearing over the aid proposal, Rep. Ron Dellums (D-CA) referred to the investigations of NGOs into Contras abuses.⁹⁸ He urged the administration to pursue peace negotiations while calling its Nicaragua policy a violation of international law and of “our own traditions of freedom and democracy and negotiation and peaceful settlement of complex problems.” Dellums argued that no support for the administration’s approach to Nicaragua existed outside the United States and Central America. “Our link to the Contras is illegal, it is immoral, it is insane, it cannot be defended.” He agreed with NGO assessments and argued that the United States should offer an example to other nations and not spend \$100 million dollars on guerrilla warfare to destabilize a government in one of the poorest nations in the hemisphere.⁹⁹

Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Claiborne Pell (D-RI) expressed his concerns about the human rights implications of U.S. support for the Contras. He noted the disturbing similarities between the violence used by the Somoza regime and its National Guard and the violence used by the same individuals

⁹⁷ Robert H. Michel, Dear Colleague Letter, March 10, 1986, Latin American Strategic Studies Institute papers, Box 5, Hoover Institution Archives.

⁹⁸ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, *Full Committee Consideration of H.J. Res. 540 Relating to Central America Pursuant to the International Security and Development Cooperation Act of 1985: Hearings Before the House Committee on Armed Services*, 99th Cong., 2nd sess., 1986, 15.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

who operated as counterrevolutionaries against the Sandinistas. “Contras are still brutally committing human rights violations, according to Amnesty International and other respectable organizations that have taken testimony from witnesses.” He went further, arguing that “[i]f the definition of terrorism is the seeking by violent, indiscriminate action to affect the policy of or to overturn a government, then, in effect, the Contras are our terrorists carrying out such a strategy.” Pell questioned whether a victory by the Contras served Nicaragua’s best interest because it likely would result in a regime as repressive and violent as that of Somoza.¹⁰⁰

“This effort remains futile, morally, practically, and strategically, and it is unworthy of our Nation,” declared Rep. Alan Cranston (D-CA).¹⁰¹ Cranston followed up Pell’s statement by arguing that the Contras committed acts of terrorism while Washington purported to pursue multilateral efforts to defeat terrorism elsewhere. “Through the Contra program, the American taxpayer is bankrolling a mixed bag of thugs, mercenaries, former Somocistas and disaffected Sandinistas who are trying to terrorize the Nicaraguan people into taking up arms against their Government.” He likened the request from Reagan to the consistent requests for more funding in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Cranston also noted reports by the General Accounting Office of the inefficient manner of using funds already appropriated for Contra support and to other reports that the Contras enjoyed very little popular support in the Nicaragua and that they proved militarily inadequate

¹⁰⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua: Aid to Nicaraguan Resistance Proposal: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 99th Cong., 2nd sess., 1986, 3.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

against the Nicaraguan government forces.¹⁰² Cranston acknowledged that he opposed the form of government the Sandinistas had established in Nicaragua, but he also argued that, if the administration really believed it presented a danger to the United States, it should make the case that the Sandinista government should be overthrown. He called for an end to Contra support.

Despite a television and radio address in mid-March by the president appealing to the nation to support the freedom fighters and again tying the FSLN to the Soviets, the White House still could not bring to its side enough members of the House to pass the proposal. The House narrowly defeated the measure 210-222.¹⁰³ The Nicaragua Network saw three factors that worked in favor of its opposition. Swing voters waited until just before the vote to reveal their position, and those House members stated that the large number of calls and letters received to their offices swayed their opinions. Second, the effort by the administration at “red-baiting and bribery” turned a lot of members against the administration. Third, members voted against the Contra aid believing that they could agree to a compromise package later, allowing them to still appear strong on national security and communism but not directly fund the war. Contra opponents argued that any money or supplies, military or not, for the Contras funded the war. Nevertheless, hope for Contra funding lived on as Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill agreed in April to bring the issue to another vote for fiscal year 1987, at which several Democrats offered alternatives to the president’s earlier proposal.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁰³ “Hill-Reagan Contra Tug-of-War: A Chronology.”

¹⁰⁴ “Brief Update on Nicaragua” (Nicaragua Network, 1986), 1, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 9, Wisconsin Historical Society.

In a piece in *The Washington Post* on March 14, 1986, Rep. Dave McCurdy voiced the concerns of many of those swing voters looking for a compromise to avoid continued repression and violence.¹⁰⁵ During his time in Congress, McCurdy belonged to the conservative wing of the Democratic Party and had been reluctant to oppose the president on defense issues.¹⁰⁶ McCurdy turned into a key ally of Reagan's for the previous funding vote and helped to turn around many of his colleagues. However, this time, he chastised the president for going too far and seeming to conflate aid to the Contras with policy rather than seeing it as a tool to affect policy, but he also accused Democrats of opposing Reagan as a policy of their own rather than as a strategy for affecting policy. McCurdy called for a bipartisan effort to bring change to Central America. The administration's failure to pursue real change had only led to greater levels of repression within Nicaragua. Rather than relying solely on the Contras through military aid, McCurdy advocated supporting the peace process and long-term economic growth in Central America.¹⁰⁷

The willingness of Democrats to negotiate on Contra funding presented a serious threat to the NGO goal of eliminating all Contra aid. The Nicaragua Network wrote to its supporters asking for continued efforts to defeat all Contra aid requests. The organization reminded its membership and allies of the victories in persuading Congress to water down or restrict military aid and to defeat bills entirely earlier in the year. The Nicaragua Network attributed that success to the grassroots mobilization throughout the country and within the organization, which included

¹⁰⁵ Dave McCurdy, "A Compromise on Nicaragua," *The Washington Post*, March 14, 1986, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 9, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁰⁶ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 131.

¹⁰⁷ McCurdy, "A Compromise on Nicaragua."

letter writing, public demonstration, phone bank campaigns, and delegation visits to the offices of members of Congress. The organization asked for Contra opponents to keep working.¹⁰⁸ Swing voters in Congress continued to receive a high volume of calls from constituents at their district office and in Washington.¹⁰⁹ Protestors also gathered at Congressional district offices and state capitols to protest Contra policy.¹¹⁰

To address the specific arguments of the Reagan administration, the Nicaragua Network countered that the Contras did not offer a viable democratic alternative to the Sandinistas. Supporting the FDN and its political counterpart, the Unidad Nicaragüense Opositora (UNO), did not promote human rights. The Nicaragua Network cited the work by other NGOs such as AW and the depositions taken by Reed Brody as evidence of the brutality against civilians used by the Contras to undermine the Sandinista government and the Nicaraguan economy and society. It also cited an Edgar Chamorro letter to the editor in *The New York Times* arguing that terror represented the most effective and favorite weapon of the Contras.¹¹¹ The Nicaragua Network claimed that the “majority of people killed by the Contras have been civilians. There are presently over 7,000 orphans in Nicaragua..., one hundred forty-eight school teachers and 27 health care workers

¹⁰⁸ Nicaragua Network to Friends of the Nicaragua Network, Letter, May 11, 1986, 1, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 9, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁰⁹ Staff to Michael Andrews, “Re: Followups On Contra Vote,” Memorandum, June 1986, Box 94-228/120, Michael A. Andrews Papers, 1980-1994, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

¹¹⁰ “Aid to Contras Denounced at Capitol Rally,” *Topeka Capitol Journal*, August 4, 1986, Acc. 92A-042, Box 3, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹¹¹ “Talking Points on Nicaragua” (Nicaragua Network, 1986), 2, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 3, Wisconsin Historical Society.

have been killed. The civilian death toll for 1985 was estimated at 281.” The operations of the Contras affected more than those in the line of fire. Attacks, not to mention depleted government resources caused by defense spending, reduced the quality and availability of health care, causing rising incidents of malaria, tuberculosis, and infant mortality, while malnutrition worsened after the destruction of food storage facilities.¹¹²

The Nicaragua Network also argued that no evidence existed to connect the Sandinistas to arms sales to Salvadoran insurgents that so concerned administration officials. However, revelations of mining Nicaraguan ports and the release of a manual for psychological warfare training and political assassinations by the CIA represented clear evidence of the administration’s intent to do more in Nicaragua than simply interdict arms sales. The Nicaragua Network argued that the Sandinistas worked to correct the errors of the past, particularly when it came to relations with the Miskito Indians and violations of human rights in the early years of the revolutionary government. The Nicaraguan government had also entered talks with the Atlantic Coast people regarding autonomy, and Managua tried to work with those Indian communities who wished to return to their lands.¹¹³

Notwithstanding the arguments of NGOs, Democrats in the House had a hard time voting against more funding. In June, lawmakers bought into Reagan’s position that voting “no” equated to abandoning the Contras and leaving Nicaragua to the Sandinistas. With the question successfully framed as either supporting the Contras fighting for democracy or allowing the communists complete control of Nicaragua,

¹¹² Ibid., 4.

¹¹³ Ibid., 3–5.

enough members of both parties in the House (221-209) voted for the Contras.¹¹⁴

After the victory, Reagan wrote to Alfonso Robelo and affirmed his commitment to human rights and peace for Nicaraguans. He also let Robelo know that he intended discussing the conflicts in Central America and human rights issues with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev at their meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland.¹¹⁵ Robelo could “convey [Reagan’s] greetings to your colleagues, and my admiration to all who fight for freedom in Nicaragua. In your struggle you can count on America’s continuing moral and material support.”¹¹⁶

As the tide turned against human rights-conscious opposition to the Contras, NGOs evaluated their organizations and the progress they had made. CFNFP’s Bob Alpern, Maureen Field, Bob Tiller, Jack Malinowski, and David Reed met as part of a Central America/Human Rights Review Group to discuss how the CFNFP would engage in human rights advocacy going forward. They agreed that the Coalition still needed to ensure that lawmakers in Washington always considered human rights implications regarding US foreign policy decisions and that the organization needed to develop stronger “relationships with allies in Congress and in the public.” However, the group determined that CFNFP’s future success and influence depended on the strength of its grassroots mobilizing. “The center of gravity for influencing Congress is changing in many ways to the grassroots and the Coalition is very much

¹¹⁴ “Hill-Reagan Contra Tug-of-War: A Chronology.”

¹¹⁵ Ronald W. Reagan to Alfonso Robelo, Letter, October 8, 1986, 1, Alfonso Robelo C. papers, Box 1, Hoover Institution Archives.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

a part of that reality.” CFNFP leadership resolved to create stronger integration between the lobbying in Washington and field work across the country.¹¹⁷

Likewise, the Nicaragua Network’s Coordinating Committee gathered in August 1986 for a strategy session to determine how to move forward in the hostile political environment of Washington. The Coordinating Committee agreed that the organization could build on its strength and experience in disseminating information and directing a large, diverse group of grassroots organizations throughout the country. The Nicaraguan Network staff also felt the organization had adapted to fluid situations, as tended to happen in debates over controversial bills before Congress.¹¹⁸

However, they also determined that anti-Contra advocates failed to reframe the debate that took place in Washington over the previous legislative cycle, citing the Contra opposition’s “lack of clarity [in mission] at the national level.”¹¹⁹ The Coordinating Committee found that the movement put too much emphasis on funding debates and hearings in Congress, arguing that “having Congress as an arena to fight in can be very demoralizing.”¹²⁰ Congress remained a key target for lobbying and activism, but grassroots activism emerged as an essential point of focus to influence national perception going forward. The Coordinating Committee members concluded that the ongoing debate over how, or whether, to use the Contras to pressure the Sandinistas contradicted Nicaraguan human rights.¹²¹ The premise of the

¹¹⁷ “Notes From Human Rights/Central America Review Group” (Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, July 9, 1986), 1–2, Acc. 92A-042, Box 2, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹¹⁸ “Nicaragua Network Coordinating Committee August Meeting 1986,” Minutes (Nicaragua Network, August 1986), 3-4, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 15, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

debate assumed that the United States had a role influencing Nicaraguan politics, which contradicted Nicaraguans' right to self-determination. In addition, human rights activists should strike at the idea that the United States could support a group like the Contras.

5. Conclusion

Congressional support for the Contras in 1985 and 1986 came despite what many saw as clear evidence of human rights violations by Reagan's proxy fighters. However, these violations differed from the mining of the Nicaraguan ports by the CIA or the administration's disregard for the International Court of Justice because the Contras were not U.S. personnel. There was enough separation to maintain clean hands. As such, supporting the actions of the Contras in defense of democracy fulfilled Reagan's original conception of human rights as components of foreign policy. The United States would support those governments, or insurgents, fighting for freedom and civil liberties because that served the long-term goal of promoting democracy, and promoting democracy throughout the world served human rights.

WOLA and Americas Watch did tap into a strategy for human rights advocacy that CFNFP and the Nicaragua Network soon came to adopt. Rather than comparing the Contras with the Sandinistas, or addressing the Sandinistas in any way, NGOs learned to simply tie the human rights violations of the Contras to the United States government. Noam Chomsky, the well-known philosopher and political activist and also a friend and advisor of the Nicaragua Network, offered a pointed criticism of the Nicaragua Network's messaging during the campaign against

Reagan's 1986 funding proposal. Chomsky challenged the organization's leaders to change the premise of their argument, shifting away from the policy debate.

Debating who committed the worst or most human rights violations or arguing over who had the more reliable sources played into the hands of the president and Contra supporters. The Nicaragua Network and other NGOs could not win a debate with the president of the United States that involved the degree, number, specifics, and veracity of human rights violations. Reagan commanded the power and credibility of the U.S. government and could too easily frame that debate within the Cold War political construct that Americans already believed. Furthermore, administration officials skillfully slid past questions of Contra abuse by challenging human rights advocates for their hypocrisy in calling out the Contras but not someone else: "what about the Sandinistas?" or "what about the insurgents in El Salvador?" This rhetorical tactic distracted from the larger issue of U.S.-supported violence producing human rights violations.

Chomsky instead advised challenging the underlying premise of U.S. support for violence as a human rights violation in itself.¹²² The Nicaragua Network and other NGOs needed to move beyond nuance in defending, or even addressing, the Sandinistas and, rather, condemn any violence supported and/or funded by the United States. NGOs did this by mobilizing thousands of activists throughout the country in coordinated campaigns against Reagan's Contra policy.

¹²² Noam Chomsky to Dobson, Letter, (May 13, 1986), Nicaragua Network Records, Box 2, Wisconsin Historical Society, 2.

CHAPTER 5 – DAYS OF SCANDAL AND DECISION: GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING AND THE END OF THE CONTRA WAR, 1985-1988

The administration accomplished a remarkable turnaround in 1986 with respect to winning support for the Contra War as Ronald Reagan reached the height of his power as president. Reagan convinced Congress to support the Contras and grant him full authority to conduct the covert war as he saw fit. However, the narrative of the administration supporting freedom fighters as defenders of democracy and human rights did not hold up.

A Latin America-driven peace process and the Iran-Contra scandal opened new opportunities for Contra opponents to attack the president and his administration through human rights. Nicaraguans worked among themselves and with Latin American governments to negotiate peaceful settlements to the conflicts facing Nicaragua. The Reagan administration was left as a spectator to the peace process and scrambling to remain relevant. The Iran-Contra scandal broke in late 1986, further undermining Reagan's hold over the public and his ability to persuade Congress to continue following his Nicaragua policy.¹ The allegations that U.S. officials took money from the sale of arms to Iran and transferred that money to the Contras all seemed to contradict previous assertions by the president and violate federal law.² It took NGOs and grassroots activism to force lawmakers to confront issues deeper than superficial questions regarding Congressional oversight, consultation, and who knew what about the Iranian arms sales. Anti-Contra activists

¹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 220.

² Kornbluh, "The Covert War," 35.

emphasized how the scandal symbolized the administration's dangerously narrow focus on anti-communism at the expense of human rights and the rule of law.

NGOs learned from the previous years that lawmakers had a flexible interpretation of human rights and were best persuaded through constituent activism. Nicaragua policy debates through the previous two years showed that Congress shared the president's view that the United States should help those fighting against communism, but they would not do so at the expense of human rights. They also tended to shift their priority based on constituent demand. NGOs focused their work on those constituents to create change. Grassroots campaigns took advantage of renewed energy in the movement, a developing peace process, and the Iran-Contra scandal to reshape how Americans saw Nicaragua as a human rights crisis outside the Cold War political construct. In doing so, NGOs helped shut off funding for Contra military operations and push opposition forces to accept a peace treaty and cease-fire.

1. Peace, Scandal, and Changing Perceptions

As the Contras waged a guerrilla war and Washington debated whether to fund that war, a multi-faceted peace process moved along in fits and starts, demonstrating to all involved the difficulty of reconciling the various interpretations of how best to serve human rights in Nicaragua. Groups within Nicaragua, such as the Miskito Indians, did not have a direct part in the Contra War but suffered under Sandinista repression. They advocated for their own interests based on their interpretation of human rights and the role of government in Nicaragua while the

Sandinistas and Contras remained at odds. By 1988, these groups found a way to resolve their disputes enough to coexist peacefully. That left the Reagan administration to reconcile its desire to prolong the war to promote democracy or follow the rest of Latin America and work toward peace. At the same time the administration faced the dramatic Iran-Contra scandal that threatened the whole Contra program. The perceptions of Contras as freedom fighters seeking democracy and human rights, and of an administration working toward peace, were changing.

The United States did not have a primary role in regional peace talks, and the more progress the parties made toward peace, the greater pressure the president faced from NGOs, from Congress, and from the American people to stop the fighting and reign in the Contra operation. Peace in Nicaragua, though seeming to serve human rights by at least reducing the violence, potentially ran counter to administration objectives if Reagan could not set the terms of the peace. Reagan demanded the Nicaraguan government satisfy certain democratic reforms before he would agree to back down. The Sandinistas refused to consider many of those demands because, as the Sandinistas had argued for years, Reagan's position and his attempted influence on Nicaraguan politics ran counter to the Nicaraguan people's right to self-determination and to Nicaraguan sovereignty. Furthermore, the president, according to Nicaraguan officials, supported a terrorist group and lacked the moral or political authority to make any demands on the Nicaragua state.

Meanwhile, the Sandinistas hoped to resolve the tension with indigenous groups and put a better face on the human rights debacle of the Miskito relocation. So, beginning in 1984, the Sandinistas started a dialogue with indigenous groups to

negotiate a settlement.³ Brooklyn Rivera, the general coordinator of a coalition of indigenous groups referred to collectively as MISURASATA, met with Daniel Ortega in New York City in October to begin negotiations.⁴

Before talks began, Rivera made clear that MISURASATA did not seek independence. Yet, MISURASATA was in the paradoxical position of seeking rights for indigenous people as articulated through the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse from a government adhering to the same discourse for its own purposes. The indigenous groups Rivera represented wanted a greater degree of self-determination within the Nicaraguan state that would preserve self-governance and ethnic identity.⁵ Rivera also had harsh words for the Nicaraguan government and its apparent plans to obstruct the social and cultural rights of indigenous people by incorporating them into Sandinista reforms. He accused the Sandinistas of engaging in the “same traditional, racist politics as any other ultraconservative government of the Americas... trying to convert the indigenous peoples into a new type of ‘Indians’ who would be without ethnic identity or rights, assimilated into the culture of the ladinos (the dominant non-Indians) and subjected to the interests of the State.” The relocation camps provided the evidence of this policy to Rivera and revealed the true philosophy underpinning Sandinista relations with the indigenous people.⁶

The conflict between the Sandinistas and indigenous groups of the Atlantic Coast was, at its core, over different issues than the Contra War. MISURASATA did

³ Diskin, “The Manipulation of Indigenous Struggles,” 88–93.

⁴ Jim Anaya, “MISURASATA - Sandinista Negotiations: A Chapter in the Indian Resistance in Nicaragua” (Albuquerque, NM: National Indian Youth Council, Inc., 1985), 1, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 4, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵ Anaya, 1; Brooklyn Rivera, Statement by MISURASATA, January 29, 1985, 2, Digital National Security Archive.

⁶ Rivera, Statement by MISURASATA, 2.

not represent an ideological position, and, according to Rivera, MISURASATA took no position on Cold War politics. According to Rivera, both sides of the conflict had victimized the indigenous people of Nicaragua. He declared that he and MISURASATA sought peace, and he asked for solidarity among those concerned about peace and justice for Indians in Nicaragua.⁷

Though the underlying issues remained distinct, the Contra War influenced how the Nicaraguan government handled talks with MISURASATA. Negotiations continued among representatives at meetings in Bogota and Mexico City through 1985, but the two sides could not reach a final agreement.⁸ Comandante Luis Carrión, a delegate from the Nicaraguan government to talks in Bogota, found that Rivera came to the negotiations with an “arbitrary and absurd attitude,” demanding that the government demilitarize a large area along the Atlantic Coast, which Carrión claimed would leave the nation unable to defend itself in a time of active insurgency. Rivera also required that observers come from the World Council of Indigenous Indians, the OAS Human Rights Commission, and the Nicaraguan Conference of Bishops, a condition that Carrión interpreted as relinquishing state sovereignty. The Sandinistas held as sacred the right of state sovereignty and the right to self-determination. Furthermore, Carrión objected to Rivera’s claim that MISURASATA had nothing to do with guerrilla tactics. Carrión accused the group of deploying the

⁷ Ibid., 5–9.

⁸ David Kaimowitz to Antonio Ramos Bishop, Draft of Letter, January 22, 1985, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society.

same terror tactics as the Contra groups in attacking civilian populations and communication lines.⁹

By 1987, Indian groups formed a new coalition called YATAMA through which to negotiate with the Sandinistas. YATAMA focused on Indian interests and, like MISURASATA, claimed to exist separate from other anti-Sandinista groups.¹⁰ Brooklyn Rivera again represented the coalition and entered into negotiations with the Sandinistas from January 26 to 28, 1988. In a joint public announcement, the Nicaraguan government and YATAMA stated that the Moravian Church and the Council of Protestant Churches of Nicaragua would facilitate the discussions by chairing meetings, offering recommendations, and overseeing the progress of negotiations. The parties also invited Canada, Costa Rica, Cuba, Denmark, Finland, Holland, Norway, and Sweden to send ambassadors to witness the negotiations and creation of agreements and to offer support to the peace process. Both sides called on their respective forces to stop any military action during the pendency of negotiations. The Sandinistas and YATAMA continued in discussion, resolving their outstanding issues that same year.¹¹

The Contras also hoped to negotiate a peace agreement with the Sandinistas, but their resolution took more time and depended on external factors. The Contras formed a diplomatic wing to their insurgency that engaged the Sandinistas in negotiations and enumerated the principles upon which the movement sought to

⁹ Harry E. Bergold Jr., "MISURASATA, GON Break Off Talks," Cable, May 28, 1985, 2, Digital National Security Archive.

¹⁰ Clifford, "The Nicaraguan Resistance," 11–12.

¹¹ Tomás Borge and Brooklyn Rivera to The People of Nicaragua, Particularly Those of the Atlantic Coast, and the International Community, Announcement, January 29, 1988, 1–2, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 6, Wisconsin Historical Society.

build a Nicaraguan state. The Contras remained steadfast in their opposition to a Sandinista government as long they enjoyed the encouragement and financial support of the president of the United States to keep fighting. Meanwhile, the Sandinistas refused to accept the Contras as a legitimate opposition movement, declaring them terrorists and a proxy force of an imperialist foreign power. Both sides considered the other a threat to human rights in Nicaragua.

A coalition of Contra groups formed the Unidad Nicaragüense de Reconciliación (UNIR) and issued a statement in January 1985 to state their preconditions for participating in peace talks. UNIR required an end to the repression of political and civil rights and the termination of the State of Emergency and other restrictions on Nicaraguans' freedoms. It demanded a general amnesty for political prisoners and those in exile outside Nicaragua and accused of political crimes. UNIR also sought the removal of all foreign advisers and military personnel and a system of verification by international observers regarding the government's compliance with the preconditions.¹²

In a statement from UNIR leadership, which consisted of Alfonso Robelo of the Alianza Democrática Revolucionaria Nicaragüense (ADREN), Adolfo Calero of FDN, and Wycliffe Diego of MISURA and the Black Creoles, UNIR proposed various terms to a peace agreement with the Sandinistas to ensure that the human rights of Nicaraguans remained inviolable. UNIR proposed an independent judiciary and a restructuring of security forces to ensure professionalism and independence

¹² Alfonso Robelo, Adolfo Calero, and Wycliffe Diego, "Statement on Reconciliation by Union of Nicaraguans," Press Release (Nicaraguan Democratic Force, January 8, 1985), 1–2, Digital National Security Archive.

from the Sandinistas. UNIR further advocated for a non-aligned foreign policy to protect the sovereignty of the Nicaraguan people and remove Nicaragua from the bipolar Cold War conflict. The Contra coalition also wanted to integrate the Indians of the Atlantic Coast into Nicaraguan society with guarantees for the respect and preservation of the culture, identity, and rights of the Indians.¹³

The proposed terms did not differ much from what the FSLN sought, but the FSLN also required the Contras to lay down arms and cut ties with the United States. The Sandinistas rejected UNIR's proposed terms and declared negotiating with the Contras with the current relationship with the United States inconsistent with the rights of Nicaraguans and the sovereignty of the Nicaraguan government. Carlos Tünnermann Bernheim, Nicaraguan Ambassador to the United States, argued that Managua supported Contadora and even accepted the September 1984 Contadora peace proposal. However, the government would not engage a group led by former National Guard officers who formerly brutalized the Nicaraguan people. Tünnermann cited NGO human rights reporting, arguing that "[r]ecent reports by Americas Watch and the International Human Rights Law Group – respected American human rights organizations – confirm dozens of My Lai-type atrocities by contra forces and accuse the contras of a deliberate campaign of terror against civilians." Tünnermann also denied that the Contras had any standing to negotiate with the government because they had no constituency in Nicaragua. Rather than

¹³ Ibid., 2–4.

forming organically through a real social or political movement, the Contras emerged out of a CIA operation.¹⁴

Tünnermann affirmed that the Nicaraguan government sought peace, democracy, and an open society. In January 1985, the government issued a general amnesty to resistance fighters who laid down arms and returned to society. Those returning fighters could also stand for office and vote in elections. The government would repeal the State of Emergency and restore all political and civil rights promised by the revolution that had been restricted due to the war. Tünnermann stated that, if the Contras were “really fighting for democracy, as their propagandists claim, they can have it. It has already been offered to them.” He called the proposal offered by the Contras one of “the CIA’s propaganda moves to make the contras appear to be peace-loving democrats—which they are not—and to justify more congressional funding for this illegal and immoral war.”¹⁵ A chief concern of the Sandinistas remained the influence of the United States.

A regional peace accord could change the dynamics of Sandinista-Contra relations, but, through 1985, the Contadora process achieved very little, prompting a reset of the talks. Foreign ministers of the Contadora nations, Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama, and other supporters of the initiative met on January 11 and 12, 1986, in Caraballeda, Venezuela, to discuss the obstacles to a settlement and how the process should continue. They agreed that peace should come from agreement on certain fundamental points that articulated a shared understanding of human rights

¹⁴ Carlos Tünnermann Bernheim, “We Will Never Negotiate with the Contras,” *The Washington Post*, March 30, 1985, Digital National Security Archive.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

for Latin America. Peace needed to come from terms set by Latin Americans, not an outside power or from considerations of Cold War geopolitics. Any agreement should include terms prohibiting foreign intervention in the affairs of Latin American nations and respect for territorial integrity and national sovereignty. The Contadora nations also wanted pluralistic democracy and universal suffrage without any foreign military presence and influence. The gathered ministers affirmed their intent to pursue an agreement that respected human rights, including civil and political rights.¹⁶

The Contadora process withered, but the ideals of the Caraballeda statement laid a foundation for a subsequent attempt at regional peace talks initiated by the Central American nations led by Costa Rican president Óscar Arias-Sánchez in Esquipulas, Guatemala. Arias proposed a framework for an agreement that included arms limitations, an end to the guerrilla warfare, and greater democratization in Central American countries.¹⁷ The framework did not include the Contras as parties to the peace process, which drew the ire of the White House. The State Department would try to bring the Contras into the fold, but Secretary Shultz understood that Arias believed that including the Contras would impede talks with the Sandinistas. Administration officials still hoped the other Central American leaders would support the U.S. insistence on including the Contras, but Washington's influence seemed to be diminishing.¹⁸

¹⁶ Augusto Ramirez Ocampo et al., "Caraballeda Message for Peace, Security and Democracy in Central America" (Caraballeda, January 12, 1986), 1–2, Digital National Security Archive.

¹⁷ Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, 218.

¹⁸ George P. Shultz to U.S. Embassy Guatemala, "Official-Informal (Week of February 2)," Cable, February 7, 1987, 2, Death squads, guerrilla war, covert operations, and genocide: Guatemala and the United States, 1954-1999; Accession number: GU01100, Digital National Security Archive.

Nevertheless, the participants at Esquipulas made progress. Daniel Ortega and the presidents of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras signed the Declaración de Esquipulas (Declaration of Esquipulas) on May 25, 1986, affirming their commitment to continue meeting to craft a peace agreement.¹⁹ The conference then produced a draft treaty in June. Although the participants did not reach a final agreement, the prospects for a peaceful resolution to conflict in Nicaragua and an end to the violation of human rights looked more possible through the middle part of 1986.²⁰ However, the Central American leaders, the Sandinistas, and NGOs worried that the Contras and the appropriation in June by Congress of \$100 million of unrestricted funds would torpedo any progress made at Esquipulas.

With that appropriation, the administration looked to further expand the Nicaragua operation, to develop a political opposition movement and popular base of support for the counterrevolution in Nicaragua, and to firm up support elsewhere in Latin America and in Europe for the Nicaraguan opposition groups. Operation planners also proposed ramping up the level of military support for the Contras, providing the insurgents “howitzers, armed boats, [and] ground support aircraft.” The CIA hoped to leverage the new support and funding increase from Congress to build a “thriving insurgency with three active fronts able to conduct sustained operations in Nicaragua” that could challenge the Sandinista for control of

¹⁹ Oscar Arias Sanchez et al., “Declaración de Esquipulas,” May 25, 1986, United Nations Peacemaker Peace Agreements Database, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CR%20HN%20GT%20NI%20SV_860525_EsquipulasI%28esp%29.pdf.

²⁰ D’Amato, “Report on Trip to Central American Countries July 5-16, 1986,” 16.

territory.²¹ For the moment, however, the Contras enjoyed little popular support in the United States or anywhere else, except among the Cold Warriors of Congress.²² The president had failed to change that.²³

Indeed, the Contras had an image problem caused by the consistent human rights accusations and the nation's aversion to supporting covert action and guerrilla warfare.²⁴ The administration responded to negative portrayals with reassuring descriptions of the Contras as a smoothly operating and popularly supported resistance force, a perception that U.S. officials knew did not match reality. Secretary of State George Shultz had determined that the Nicaraguan opposition movement needed reform before it could broaden its popular appeal in the United States and in Nicaragua. Shultz reported that UNO had long suffered from internal dissention and seemed unable to control the FDN. State Department officials believed that UNO also needed to force out "the most obstructionist FDN leaders" and diversify UNO's representation of Nicaraguan sectors.²⁵ The White House and Congress hoped a new human rights program for the Contras, paid for out of the \$100 million appropriation of October 1986, would create positive change in the structure and conduct of the resistance.

²¹ "U.S. Objectives for Nicaragua" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, January 1, 1987), 1, CIA Covert Operations: From Carter to Obama, 1977-2010, Accession number CO01929, Digital National Security Archive.

²² The president's job performance on Nicaragua received a thirty-four percent approval rating. ("Gallup Poll" June 1986, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, ropercenter.cornell.edu.)

²³ "U.S. Objectives for Nicaragua," 2.

²⁴ "Public Diplomacy Action Plan for Explaining U.S. Central American Policy in the United States, Europe and Latin America," Project Proposal (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, May 12, 1987), 1, Digital National Security Archive.

²⁵ Shultz to U.S. Embassy Guatemala, "Official-Informal (Week of February 2)," 1-2.

The funding included \$3 million for the creation of the Asociación Nicaragüense Pro-Derechos Humanos (ANPDH) to investigate and report on human rights violations by the Contras.²⁶ ANPDH consisted of Nicaraguan lawyers and operated out of a main office in San José, Costa Rica.²⁷ The Contra human rights program also involved teaching soldiers proper conduct and training officials to investigate misconduct. Creating a justice system within the military structure enabled the Contras to enforce the programs and education established through U.S. guidance.²⁸ U.S. advisors helped to integrate human rights education into all aspects of training for military personnel rather than just one class to make the instruction more meaningful, practical, and seamless within the broader training regimen of soldiers. The instruction consisted of the laws of warfare, the Geneva Convention protocols for guerrilla warfare, treatment of enemy forces, prohibition of forced military service and summary executions, respecting the Red Cross and its operations, and defending principles of democracy.²⁹

ANPDH did not impress the U.S. human rights community. After several months of ANPDH in operation, WOLA criticized the organization for the seemingly farcical nature of its human rights investigations and reporting. Congress had instructed ANPDH to focus on the conduct of the Contras. WOLA accused

²⁶ Rick Boucher to Colleagues, Letter, August 4, 1987, Box 94-228/99, Michael A. Andrews Papers, 1980-1994, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

²⁷ "Nicaragua Responses to Amnesty International Inquiries Concerning Alleged Abuses by Anti-Government Forces" (Amnesty International, November 10, 1987), folder Nica Human Rights (pre-1990) 1 of 2, Box 239, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

²⁸ "U.S. Objectives for Nicaragua," 6.

²⁹ Alan D. Fiers Jr. to Morris D. Busby, "Human Rights Training for the Armed Resistance," Memorandum, February 4, 1987, 3-6, CIA Covert Operations: From Carter to Obama, 1977-2010, Accession number CO01936, Digital National Security Archive.

ANPDH of spending much of its resources investigating the Nicaraguan government. John Burstein of WOLA wrote in the *Baltimore Sun* in September 1987 that “ANPDH has spent virtually all its energies on publicizing alleged abuses by the Sandinista government while all but ignoring those by the contras. The ANPDH Washington office can list no more than six cases of contra abuses after seven months in operation.” Meanwhile, President Reagan relied on the reporting of ANPDH to assess the human rights record of the Contras in reports that the administration transmitted to Congress as the basis for requesting additional funding.³⁰

The public relations profile of the Contras took another severe hit in 1986 when, in November, press reports linked the secret sale of U.S. arms to the Iranian government to funds received by the Contras, violating the restrictions enacted by Congress. In 1984, with the Boland Amendment still in place, the president’s intelligence and national security advisers determined that Congress may not be a reliable source of funding for the Contra operation. The White House looked elsewhere for Contra funding.³¹ In addition to third-party countries, the NSC worked with private individuals and organizations to raise money.

On November 3, 1986, a Lebanese magazine, *Al-Shira’a*, reported that a U.S. national security adviser, Robert McFarlane, met in secret with representatives of the Iranian government. The report raised alarm in the United States about how and why a highly-placed official in the Reagan administration would be in contact with an

³⁰ John Burstein, “Contra Conduct,” *The Baltimore Sun*, September 4, 1987, Box 350, Reprints/Central America 1987, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

³¹ H. W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2015), 441-42.

adversary and an alleged supporter of international terrorism. Though the nature of the meetings remained uncertain in late 1986, the negotiations appeared to involve the transfer of U.S. military equipment to Iran. Many in the U.S. and international media speculated a deal might relate to the release of hostages held in Lebanon. On November 13, Reagan acknowledged that some defensive military hardware had been shipped to Iran as a sign of good faith in negotiations to reestablish ties with Iran and build better relations, bring an end to the Iran-Iraq War, reduce state-sponsored terrorism, and arrange the release of the hostages. Reagan assured the American people that his administration did not break any law in shipping arms to Iran and did not make concessions in the negotiations for the release of the hostages.

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Reagan's assurances notwithstanding, the story got worse. Less than two weeks after the president's address, Attorney General Edwin Meese declared that Lt. Col. Oliver North had diverted to the Contras the money paid by the Iranians for the arms shipments. Through this arrangement, North secured between \$10 to \$30 million for the Nicaraguan guerrillas. Meese stated that National Security Advisor, Vice Admiral John M. Poindexter, had known about the plan. Reagan maintained that he had no knowledge of the scheme while Poindexter and North took much of the blame. Reagan let the American people know that going forward, national security initiatives would proceed only with his direct authorization. This was too little, too late, and Democrats in Congress were furious. On November 26, the

³² Richard M. Preece, "Arms Shipments to Iran, Updated December 9, 1986," Issue Brief (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, December 9, 1986), 1-2, Dole Legislative Relations, 1969-1996, Box 124, Robert J. Dole Archive and Special Collections.

Justice Department announced that the FBI would open an investigation into the Iranian arms deal and diversion of funds to the Contras.³³

The Iran-Contra Affair weighed heavily on Congress as it considered how to proceed on Nicaragua policy. Some lawmakers opposed any additional aid for the Contras in light of the administration's transgressions that seemed to reinforce how misguided Reagan's approach to Nicaragua had been. The peace process under the stewardship of President Arias looked even more attractive as U.S. Nicaragua policy descended into Congressional inquiry and criminal investigations.³⁴ It took the work of NGOs to interpret the two narratives together and as representative of a larger threat to human rights in Nicaragua.

Iran-Contra confirmed for Reagan's critics the deceitful and unlawful tactics of the administration and its disregard for the human rights implications of its policies. Anti-Contra advocates declared that the human rights violations of the Contras, the illegal arms sales to Iran, and the diversion of funds by administration officials demonstrated the moral bankruptcy of a policy to blindly support guerrillas who claimed to fight against communism. Organizations and activists used the revelations against further Contra aid, while holding out the peace negotiations in Central America as the example for the United States to follow.

CFNFP disagreed with claims that Iran-Contra came from a few bad actors in the administration. Coalition activists argued that the scandal represented a broader pattern of administration misbehavior, particularly as it related to Nicaragua. "The

³³ Ibid., 2-3.

³⁴ Douglas H. Bosco to Jim Wright, Letter, November 20, 1987, Box 702, Jim Wright Papers. Special Collections, Mary Coats Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.

contra operation as presented to congress has been permeated with fraud in all its phases, in creating, training, and sustaining of the anti-Sandinista forces.” The CFNFP argued that the greatest fraud the administration committed against Congress and the American people with respect to the Contras was to represent the resistance forces as legitimate and worthy of U.S. support. Furthermore, in selling arms to Iran, a state known to support international terrorism, and then sending the proceeds to the Contras, the administration disregarded human rights records multiple times to conduct its foreign policy. As of December 1986, \$40 million of the \$100 million appropriated in October had yet to be released by Congress for distribution to the Contras. The CFNFP called on Congress to prevent the release of that final \$40 million and refuse to further fund the administration’s unlawful policy. Releasing the money would actually provide the Contras more than the intended \$100 million after accounting for the diverted funds from Iran arms sales.³⁵ The Iran-Contra scandal demonstrated that the administration had no accountability for the use of funds for the Contras.³⁶

2. The Central American Peace Accord

The Caraballeda announcement, Esquipulas, and the Iran-Contra Affair damaged the credibility of the Contras and the president. The narrative that the Contras stood for democracy and human rights seemed less plausible. NGOs seized

³⁵ “Contra Aid Talking Points: Reagagate and the Contra/Iran Scam” (Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, December 16, 1986), 1–2, Acc. 92A-042, Box 5, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

³⁶ “Talking Points for Central America Legislation” (Washington, D.C.: Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, April 1987), Acc. 92A-042, Box 5, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

the opportunity to reinforce how Reagan's Contra program violated international law and human rights. With the changing circumstances surrounding Nicaragua, the NGOs were able to build successful grassroots campaigns against Contra funding and turn Congress against continued support of the war.

The Central American peace process raised hopes in the United States that Nicaraguans could resolve their conflict without further bloodshed or U.S. involvement. That hope further undermined the Reagan administration's position for more Contra funding without some connection to advancing the peace process. To keep his administration relevant in resolving the crisis and reassert control in Central American affairs, Reagan moved to work out a bipartisan peace agreement of his own.³⁷

On August 5, 1987, House Speaker Jim Wright and the president agreed to a cease-fire between the Sandinistas and Contras.³⁸ Among the conditions of the cease-fire, the agreement prohibited any Soviet bloc or Cuban military bases in Nicaragua, the Nicaraguans had to reduce the size of their military, and Nicaragua could not serve as a safe-haven to insurgents launching attacks on other countries. Only after the OAS verified that both sides complied with the terms of the cease-fire would the United States suspend military aid to the Contras. In turn, the Nicaraguan government would no longer receive aid from Cuba, the Soviet Union, or other communist nations. Managua would also suspend the State of Emergency, schedule new elections, and respect the human rights of its citizens. The proposal also called

³⁷ Elaine Sciolino, "Latin Peace Plan Is Said to Set Back Help for Contras: Aid," *New York Times*, August 11, 1987, Box 9, Dave McCurdy Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives.

³⁸ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 221.

for a formal plan for reconciliation, dialogue, and amnesty for resistance forces and a plan for demobilization of both Sandinista and resistance forces.³⁹ Reagan made a bold move by working with the Democratic speaker of the House to offer a peace agreement for Nicaragua, but the basic structure did not differ significantly from what Reagan had always sought for Nicaragua. The Sandinistas and the Contras played no role in this negotiation process.

While Reagan and Wright negotiated in Washington, Arias kept working with the Central American leaders and crafted an agreement articulating a vision of human rights consistent with the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse as put forward by the anti-Somoza coalition in 1980 and the Sandinistas thereafter with strong statements for individual liberty. The Central American nations first produced their own framework for a deal in late July 1987. They invited the Contadora nations to a meeting in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, on July 31 and August 1, to discuss the progress.⁴⁰ The summit led to a proposed peace treaty, known as the Guatemala Accords or the Esquipulas II Accords, on August 7, 1987, two days after the announcement of the Wright-Reagan proposal.⁴¹ Esquipulas II included obligations for each country to negotiate cease fires in any ongoing civil war and to pursue a path toward democratization.⁴² The agreement stated that the

Governments commit themselves to promote authentic democratic, pluralistic and participatory process that included the promotion of social justice; respect for human rights, [state] sovereignty, the territorial integrity of states

³⁹ "A Peace Plan [Text of the U.S. Peace Plan]" August 5, 1987, 1–2, Digital National Security Archive.

⁴⁰ "Press Release" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Embassy of Mexico, August 1, 1987), Box 9, Dave McCurdy Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives.

⁴¹ Oscar Arias Sanchez et al., "Procedimiento Para Establecer La Paz Firme Y Duradera En Centroamerica," August 7, 1987, Accession number: NI03023, Digital National Security Archive.

⁴² Arnson, *Crossroads*, 221.

and the right of all nations to free determine, without outside interference of any kind, its economic, political, and social model...⁴³

As part of the democratization process, the countries agreed to free speech, free association, and political pluralism for all groups. The Accords called for a national dialogue among opposition groups to facilitate democratic reforms, justice, and peace. It contained a provision that called for an amnesty decree by each government that guaranteed “the inviolability of life; as well as freedom in all its forms, property and the security of the persons to whom these decrees apply.” The agreement also called for the creation of a National Reconciliation Commission to verify the steps taken to carry out the terms of the Accords.⁴⁴

Esquipulas II also addressed the critical question of foreign influence. Signatory countries agreed to terminate all assistance from foreign nations and request that all nations cease providing aid to paramilitary forces in the region, but that prohibition did not preclude aid to help repatriation of irregular forces such as the Contras. This meant that the Central American governments expected the United States to terminate military aid to the Contras but would allow funding to assist reintegrating the Contras into Nicaraguan society. Each nation also agreed to no longer allow their countries to serve as staging grounds for operations to destabilize another government.⁴⁵ The Central American plan still allowed outside military support for governments, and the agreement did not require elections to be scheduled

⁴³ Arias Sanchez et al., “Procedimiento Para Establecer La Paz Firme Y Duradera En Centroamerica,” 1.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 8.

sooner than those already on the calendar.⁴⁶ All Central American governments requested that the United States refrain from further Contra aid until after the scheduled January 1988 summit.

Speaker Wright supported the Arias plan despite its differences with the Wright-Reagan proposal. Ironically, he argued that to expect Latin America to adopt an agreement reached in Washington without their involvement would be naïve and arrogant and counterproductive for U.S. foreign policy. He did suggest that the Wright-Reagan agreement motivated the Central American leaders.⁴⁷ Wright stated that determining Nicaragua's compliance with the terms of Esquipulas II should be up to the Central Americans and not the United States. Wright would give great weight to the words of Arias and others.⁴⁸

McCurdy also expressed his support for the peace agreement adopting Anticolonial Human Rights discourse language in his interpretation of U.S.-Nicaragua relations. In an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times*, McCurdy wrote of peace, democracy, and human rights in broad, inclusive terms. He wrote that the Arias-led effort followed the principle that “democracy is not accomplished simply by free elections.” He recognized that the “Costa Rican experience shows that when there is security, social justice can be maintained. The message was clear: We must help the democracies make democracy pay off in social and economic ways, as well as politically.” He argued that not only economic aid was needed for Central American

⁴⁶ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 221.

⁴⁷ Jim Wright, “Give the Peace Plan a Chance,” September 23, 1987, Box 702, Jim Wright Papers. Special Collections, Mary Coats Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.

⁴⁸ “Contra Aid Hinges on Central American Peace Plan,” *Latin America Update*, October 1987, 1, Box 30, Folder: WOLA [Early docs] 2 of 2, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

democracies to thrive, but also more robust trade and investment. In even more clear terms than he had used in the past, McCurdy rejected the underlying policy of Reagan that accepted violence and human rights abuse as the price to pay for building democracy.⁴⁹

By September 1987, McCurdy believed that the Contra insurgency had failed and that it could no longer maintain an effective fighting force or political influence in Nicaragua. He argued that the United States needed to give full support to the Central America peace process. Furthermore, the Nicaraguan government planned to hold elections, which had been the ultimate goal of the Reagan administration's policy. McCurdy argued that the U.S. government should stay consistent and allow democracy to take root through the electoral process.⁵⁰

Reagan did not provide the same level of support for Esquipulas II as did Wright, and he did not share McCurdy's open-minded approach to democratic reform. Foreign intervention remained the key element for Reagan as it did for the Sandinistas. The president rejected the Arias plan because he claimed the agreement failed to eliminate Soviet support for the Sandinista government. The Wright-Reagan plan linked an end of Contra support from the United States to an end to Sandinista support from the Soviets, regardless of the level of support received by the Sandinistas.⁵¹ After rejecting the plan, the administration announced in September that it would seek \$270 million in additional funding for the Contras in a November

⁴⁹ Dave McCurdy, "Democracy, Not Cotras, Is the Issue in Central America," *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 1987, Box 9, Dave McCurdy Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives.

⁵⁰ Steve Adams, "McCurdy Now Believes Rebellion by Contras Failure," *The Norman Transcript*, September 15, 1987, Box 9, Dave McCurdy Collection, 1981-1996, Carl Albert Center Archives.

⁵¹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 221.

vote, even though Esquipulas II called for an end to outside support for insurgencies. It had little chance of success with many lawmakers turning against the Contras. The administration postponed its proposal until after the first of the year.⁵²

The Contra forces, having united under the banner of the Resistencia Nicaragüense (RN) on May 13, 1987, pushed back against what it saw as the Sandinista party dictating Nicaragua's future.⁵³ Writing for the RN, Ernesto Palazio declared that the resistance forces supported the Central American peace accord and accepted that the Sandinistas would continue to play a large role in the future of the country, but the RN objected to the Sandinistas proceeding as if they were the only relevant political party. RN claimed that a unilateral ceasefire declared by Ortega denied a voice to opposition groups and contradicted the peace accord that called for a negotiated cease-fire.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the RN formally accepted the terms of Esquipulas II in November 1987 and called on Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo to mediate talks between them and the Sandinista government.⁵⁵ In November 1987, the Sandinistas proposed a mutual cease-fire and reintegration of the guerrillas into Nicaraguan society through amnesty. The cease-fire would begin no later than December 5, 1987, and last until January 7, 1988, during which the Contras could

⁵² "Contra Aid Hinges on Central American Peace Plan," 3.

⁵³ "Assembly Charters Resistance Leadership for Victory," *Nicaragua Update*, July 31, 1987, Dole Press Related Materials, Box 617, Robert J. Dole Archive and Special Collections.

⁵⁴ Ernesto Palazio to Member of Congress, October 12, 1987, 1, Box 94-228/52, Michael A. Andrews Papers, 1980-1994, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

⁵⁵ Adolfo Calero et al. to Miguel Cardenal Obando Bravo, Letter, November 12, 1987, Alfonso Robelo C. papers, Box 2, Hoover Institution Archives.

turn in their arms and receive amnesty, all under the supervision of the International Verification and Follow-up Commission (IVFC).⁵⁶

Reagan's administration seemed to have lost much of the influence it may have once had over Central American affairs, which NGOs exploited to mobilize and to reclaim control of the narrative. The idea that the Sandinistas represented an unacceptable threat to democracy and to human rights in the Western Hemisphere receded as the Contras and the Reagan administration now looked like the obstacles to peace and human rights. Growing dissent forced the administration to seek funding for the Contras, if at all, in more limited amounts than officials had hoped. Human rights advocacy created a message of resistance that incorporated Iran-Contra, the peace process, and the atrocities committed by the Contras. Reframing the Contra question helped to eliminate any additional military aid for the Contras and helped convince the Sandinistas and Contras to sign a peace agreement ending the war.

3. Days of Decision

Deploying large grassroots campaign, NGOs threw their full organizational weight behind both Esquipulas II and the Nicaraguan government's proposed cease-fire and amnesty agreement. Organizations were building off their experiences and networks developed over eight years of Contra opposition and activist cooperation. In April 1987, CFNFP joined with labor organizations and churches to sponsor a

⁵⁶ "Proposal of the Government of Nicaragua for the Procedure to Be Followed for the Cease-Fire, Disarmament, Amnesty and Integration into Civilian Life of the Irregular Forces" November 13, 1987, 2-4, Alfonso Robelo C. Papers, Box 2, Hoover Institution Archives.

mobilization effort against U.S. policy in Central America and South Africa. Staff considered “the mobilization... a tremendous success in intensifying public debate: it reverberated through churches and campuses and to the AFL-CIO executive council.”⁵⁷ The effort also drew considerable attendance and national attention. Organizers believed the march through Washington went well, despite poor weather. An interfaith service attracted more than the facility could hold. Protesters gathered at CIA headquarters in Langley in a non-violent demonstration, sitting in front of the gates, holding signs or wearing other symbols honoring victims of violence, and causing long traffic jams while gaining a large amount of media coverage.⁵⁸ The demonstration at Langley protested the U.S. intervention, covert and overt, in Central America and Southern Africa and the violence caused by those policies.⁵⁹ CFNFP’s organizing effort also turned out approximately four hundred delegation visits to Congressional offices.⁶⁰

In the summer of 1987, as Oliver North testified to Congress in hearings that captivated television audiences, national and local organizations took on an even bigger coordinated, national campaign called Days of Decision. The campaign, described by participant organizations as a uniting of “many of the organizations working for a just and lasting peace in Central America,” represented “the broadest

⁵⁷ “Evaluation of the April Mobilization” (Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, June 1987), 1, Acc. 90A-113, Box 20, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁵⁸ “Evaluation of the April Mobilization,” 2; “Non-Violent Civil Disobedience at CIA Headquarters” (The National Mobilization for Justice and Peace in Central America and Southern Africa, March 1987), Acc. 91A-099, Box 4, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁵⁹ “Non-Violent Civil Disobedience at CIA Headquarters.”

⁶⁰ “Evaluation of the April Mobilization,” 2.

and largest coordinated effort yet to stop contra aid.”⁶¹ Approximately forty national groups, including human rights, social justice, and religious organizations, took part in Days of Decision. Organizers marshalled the efforts of hundreds of local groups around the United States, directing Congressional lobbying, public demonstrations, and media engagement. A Steering Committee formed to set the agenda and direction for the Campaign, including crafting messaging to respond to policy and legislation in Congress. A two-person staff coordinated the work of the Steering Committee, carried out the Campaign’s administrative work, created the mailers, and responded to correspondence.⁶² Days of Decision represented an important moment in the anti-Contra movement because, according to those involved, it “made possible a qualitative leap in broad, sustained interaction between national and local campaigns.”⁶³

NGOs organized Days of Decision in anticipation of the president asking Congress for up to \$270 million in military aid for the Contras.⁶⁴ Eleanor Milroy, Field Director for the CFNFP, Salley Timmel, Director of Church Women United, Rev. George Chauncey, Director of Washington Office Presbyterian Church (USA), and Rev. Robert Tiller, the Director of Office of Governmental Relations of American Baptist Churches, wrote on behalf of the Days of Decision campaign to supporters that “Congress is preparing to make the most significant policy decision since the Vietnam War – Whether to continue the contra war against Nicaragua.”

⁶¹ Eleanor Milroy et al. to Friends, Letter, July 27, 1987, 1, Acc. 92A-042, Box 19, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁶² “The Campaign -- A Regional Approach to Contra Aid” (Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, November 1987), 1-3, Acc. 92A-042, Box 19, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

They declared that “[i]f contra aid passes in the wake of the Iran-contra scandal, it will define a foreign policy based on the violation of both our Constitution and our sense of morality.” The letter appealed to supporters to work to prevent the “brutal war” from becoming a fixture in U.S. foreign policy even amid the scandals.⁶⁵

Days of Decision consisted of mass public events such as a demonstration in September 1987 in front of the Russell Senate Building in Washington that brought national attention to the cause.⁶⁶ The campaign helped local groups organize phone banking efforts, made possible rapid messaging responses to administration policy and Congressional debates, formed public education efforts to explain the status of funding requests and voting, and maintained regular updates to local groups regarding actions of Congress. Local groups flooded their senators and representative in Congress with over ninety thousand letters opposing continued Contra aid, and, on September 15, approximately 120 public demonstrations took place around the country, including Washington, D.C. Over one hundred communities engaged in public action on September 29, such as demonstrations, prayers, and delegation visits to Congressional offices. The day’s events included Rep. Barbara Boxer (D-CA) and Sen. Tom Harkin speaking against Contra aid. By October 1987, local groups had staged over three hundred delegation visits to local Congressional offices, and many groups engaged in weekly delegation visits to the district office. On November 4 and 5, public demonstration took place again in more than fifty cities. Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, a Nobel Prize Laureate, and Paul Fischer and Father Enrique Blandón, both

⁶⁵ Milroy et al. to Friends, Letter, July 27, 1987, 1.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

kidnapped by the Contras in early October, spoke at a November 4 event in Washington.⁶⁷

As a primary organizer of the campaign, CFNFP saw important returns on its grassroots work. It reported that “[w]ork in the districts of the House leadership, traditional contra aid opponents, and Rules Committee members (none of them ‘swing voters’ on contra aid) began to show important results. Scores of Representatives have now indicated an unwillingness to vote for more aid, in any form, even if buried in a continuing resolution with the support of the House leadership.”⁶⁸ The CFNFP also declared that “[t]hrough the fall, the Days of Decision campaign has emerged as the coordinating center of a very large part of the Central America movement. The campaign has allowed the movement as a whole to reach a new level of shared political sophistication.”⁶⁹ Grassroots work changed attitudes among lawmakers. The pressure from constituents created by grassroots mobilization empowered human rights groups to shape the terms of the debate, rather than simply follow the agenda of liberals in Congress, and emphasized peace and the danger to human rights posed by the Reagan administration.⁷⁰ The mobilization and pressure applied to Congress by constituents forced the Reagan Administration in late 1987 and 1988 to back down from planned Contra aid requests and seek smaller non-military funding compromises.⁷¹ Even Contra aid backers in Congress, such as

⁶⁷ “The Campaign -- A Regional Approach to Contra Aid,” 1–2.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁰ “Central America Work,” Staff Meeting Minutes (Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, September 30, 1987), Acc. 90A-113, Box 20, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁷¹ “The Campaign -- A Regional Approach to Contra Aid,” 3.

Kansas Senator and presidential hopeful Bob Dole, acknowledged the changed political environment and difficulty for winning a vote on aid.⁷²

NGOs met in April 1988 to evaluate Days of Decision, discuss the takeaways, and talk about future activities.⁷³ Participants considered the campaign a victory on which to build.⁷⁴ National organizations reported that they appreciated the coordinated effort, but they did want to see the campaign come to a conclusion to allow them to move on to their own initiatives. Local organizations enjoyed the coordination and hoped for similar efforts in the future.⁷⁵ Local organizations considered the campaign coordination well-organized and provided important assistance to the grassroots level activism. Those groups put a lot of value in phone banks and correspondence, which had influence but the impact diminished over time because the message lost shock value. In addition, all organizations appreciated the reports regarding actions and debates taking place in Congress. The reports increased transparency in Congress and produced more pressure from constituents.⁷⁶ Organizations also valued the centralized forum for crafting strategy for Congressional lobbying efforts and passing along information quickly. Lobbying delegations were very effective in transmitting the movement's message.⁷⁷

⁷² Al Lehn to Robert J. Dole, "Contra Aid/White House Meeting," Memorandum, September 14, 1987, Legislative Relations, 1969-1996, Box 115, Robert J. Dole Archive and Special Collections.

⁷³ "Days of Decision - Evaluation Meeting" (Days of Decision, April 8, 1988), 1, Acc. 92A-042, Box 19, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁷⁴ "Notes from Days of Decision Evaluation Meeting" (Days of Decision, April 13, 1988), 4, Acc. 92A-042, Box 19, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁷⁵ "Days of Decision - Evaluation Meeting," 4.

⁷⁶ "Notes from Days of Decision Evaluation Meeting," 6-8.

⁷⁷ "Days of Decision - Evaluation Meeting," 4.

Looking toward the future, organizations saw ways to build on the success of the Days of Decision Campaign, and CFNFP prepared to step into a more defined role of guiding a national human rights and anti-Contra movement. The campaign received praise for the offensive strategies involved in the grassroots mobilizing throughout the country, a change from NGOs' typical defensive or reactive ways.⁷⁸ National organizations wanted to see the forum function of the Days of Decision campaign continue.⁷⁹ CFNFP members considered implementing such a forum through its Field Organizing Group (FOG) that would work in coordination with CAWG in crafting legislative initiatives and priorities, devising strategy for lobbying, issuing calls to action to grassroots organizations, and distributing information among local and national organizations. NGOs also noted that the campaign increased the level of participation in Contra aid resistance throughout the country, which established a greater base of activity for the future. However, many participants lamented the narrow focus on Nicaragua and the campaign's inability to incorporate the broader Central America region into the strategy and lobbying efforts.⁸⁰

David Reed considered applying the energy and organizational capabilities to a broader objective. CFNFP leadership understood that changing the terms of the debate over Central America away from the Cold War ideology of democracy versus communism, or freedom versus totalitarianism, would serve to create effective and lasting peace. Experience with the Nicaragua debate demonstrated that activism and

⁷⁸ "Notes from Days of Decision Evaluation Meeting," 6.

⁷⁹ "Days of Decision - Evaluation Meeting," 4.

⁸⁰ "Notes from Days of Decision Evaluation Meeting," 1-6.

a debate over legislation already proposed by the White House or Congress put the progressive human rights community at a disadvantage. Those debates favored the established foreign policy ideology of containing communism through political and military confrontation. CFNFP sought and advocated for an alternative approach to foreign relations, one based on the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse.

The expanded approach to activism, called the Beyond Containment Project, served the anti-Contra movement in the short-term, as activists had long protested against the containment philosophy and single-minded democracy promotion in the context of Nicaragua, but the initiative also established a foundation in the long-term for a broader philosophical change grounded in Anticolonial Human Rights. Reed and CFNFP believed that rejecting containment policy and the philosophy of anti-communism would undercut U.S. policies that justified political, economic, and military aggression that historically led to widespread violence, human rights violations, a nuclear arms race, and rising inequality at home and abroad.⁸¹ They also wanted to prevent the Reagan administration or future administrations from institutionalizing the Reagan Doctrine or similar far-reaching strategies based on military intervention.⁸²

Nevertheless, the Reagan administration continued pursuing a military solution to Nicaragua's conflict even as the peace process continued. By the time the Central American leaders gathered again in January 1988, the Sandinista government

⁸¹ "Outline of a Strategy Proposal" (Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, April 25, 1988), Acc. 90A-113, Box 16, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁸² "The Beyond Containment Project" (Washington, D.C.: Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, 1988), 1, Acc. 90A-113, Box 16, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

had fulfilled the obligations of Esquipulas II and showed it was serious about reconciling with domestic opposition groups, but Reagan wanted to keep the pressure through the Contras. The Sandinistas agreed to engage in direct negotiations with the Contras, a step the government had previously refused to take.⁸³ Ortega ended the State of Emergency through decree and reinstated all rights guaranteed by the constitution.⁸⁴ He also ended anti-Somocista tribunals.⁸⁵ Then, on February 2, 1988, Managua signed an accord with YATAMA to reconcile with indigenous groups.⁸⁶ As Reagan lost control of the peace process, he also could no longer push through Contra aid in Congress. NGOs mobilized to help defeat his new proposal and effectively terminated any additional Contra funding that would perpetuate the war.

In January 1988, the president requested Congress transfer \$36.25 million in unobligated funds for use in support of the Nicaraguan resistance, to be available until spent. The request specified that \$32.65 million would be used for non-lethal assistance, including \$450,000 specifically earmarked for human rights education and enforcement within the resistance force. The administration would not deliver before March 1, 1988, and it would deliver no lethal aid after February 28, 1988, unless, on or after March 31, 1988, the president certified to the speaker of the House and president of the Senate that a cease-fire had not been achieved, that the failure to

⁸³ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 223.

⁸⁴ Daniel Ortega, "Lifting of the State of Emergency, Decree No. 297 (unofficial Translation)," January 19, 1988, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 6, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁸⁵ Daniel Ortega, "Law to Repeal of the Anti-Somocista People's Tribunals, Decree No. 296 (unofficial translation)," January 19, 1988, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 6, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁸⁶ "Acuerdos Basicos Preliminares Entre El Gobierno De Nicaragua y La Organizacion Yatama En Ronda de Conversaciones del 25 de Enero al 2 de Febrero de 1988" February 2, 1988, Alfonso Robelo C. Papers, Box 2, Hoover Institution Archives.

maintain a cease-fire resulted from a lack of good faith by the Sandinistas, and that the Contras had put forth a good faith effort toward peace negotiations. The president would suspend aid if the parties did agree to a cease-fire.⁸⁷ These terms gave Reagan wide latitude in assessing the progress toward peace, and he always accused the Sandinistas of failing to live up to his standards when given the discretion to do so.

Reagan declared that the additional aid was “essential to enhance the national security of the United States by advancing the prospects for democracy in Nicaragua and security for all of Central America.” The president found the efforts under the Arias Plan “far from complete” in bringing the Sandinistas closer to democracy. Reagan argued that only with the continued pressure of the Nicaraguan Resistance would the Sandinistas accept democracy and no longer present a threat to the rest of Central America. He affirmed the administration’s commitment to diplomacy, but the president also found that success through diplomacy would only come with continued support of the resistance.⁸⁸ Reagan argued that the pressure from the Contras pushed the Sandinistas to the point they were at and that he would continue empowering the Contras to keep up the pressure the Sandinista government.⁸⁹

NGOs turned out to oppose the president’s new aid proposal, but the harder task came with the Democratic alternative. As communicated by the administration through hearings and the president’s own statements, members of Congress

⁸⁷ Ronald W. Reagan, “Request for Assistance for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance,” Press Release, January 27, 1988, 1–3, Box 9, Dave McCurdy Records, Carl Albert Center Archives.

⁸⁸ Ronald W. Reagan to The Congress of the United States, Letter, January 27, 1988, Box 9, Dave McCurdy Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives.

⁸⁹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 223.

understood that the Contra operation intended only to bring Daniel Ortega to the negotiating table for democratic reforms. Having done that, additional Contra funding for military purposes seemed pointless.⁹⁰ Consequently, a Democratic alternative looked much more likely to pass than did the president's proposal.

In letters sent directly to members of the House, Diane Kuntz, Human Rights Coordinator for CFNFP, let lawmakers know she spoke for over sixty national organizations making up CFNFP, and all hoped for a "humane and positive approach to the region's [Central America] problems." Kuntz urged representatives to reject any further Contra aid and referred to the Central American peace process as "the only realistic hope for an end to the regional conflict."⁹¹ She argued that more Contra aid would only undermine the peace process, perpetuate war, and create more human rights violations against the Nicaraguan people.⁹² Knowing that Democrats planned to offer an alternative to the president's proposal, the Days of Decision Campaign, still operating as a national coordinated anti-Contra effort, rejected the possibility of any aid for the Contras as long as the Contras remained armed. Days of Decision called for Congress to abide by the terms of Esquipulas II, particularly with respect to requiring the Contras disarm before distributing aid through a neutral third-party.

Speaker Wright agreed with the negative assessments of Reagan's aid proposal, labeling it a "major escalation in the contra war." He also called the provision requiring the president to certify the peace process failed before Congress released the funds a "ruse to get more contra aid. The President always reports that

⁹⁰ Ibid., 223–24.

⁹¹ Diane Kuntz to Representative, Letter, January 14, 1988, 1, Acc. 95A-074, Box 5, Latin America Working Group Records (DG 184), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁹² Ibid., 2.

nothing has been accomplished” when issuing similar certifications. A memo internal to Wright’s office further indicted the diplomatic efforts of the administration, arguing that “[e]very major diplomatic initiative that the President has promised to undertake has been ignored as soon as contra aid was approved. The United States has not engaged in bilateral talks with Nicaragua since 1984.”⁹³ The president’s continued support of the Contras seemed out of touch with developments in the region toward peace.

Other Democrats in Congress also found this new aid request senseless and potentially damaging to the fragile peace process. The party’s “Fact Sheet” addressing the president’s policy argued that, in contrast to the Contras, the Nicaraguan government took affirmative steps to protect human rights. The Sandinistas terminated the six-year-old State of Emergency, agreed to grant amnesty to over 3,000 political prisoners, planned to hold local elections, and engaged in bilateral peace negotiations with the Contras to develop a cease-fire. Ortega also promised to observe the political rights of the Nicaraguan people, and he wrote to Reagan proposing to reduce the size of Nicaragua’s military and to expel the Soviet and Cuban military advisers so reviled by the administration. A report by the Democratic Study Group (DSG), an organization composed of Democrats in the House, contrasted the cooperation of the Sandinistas with the intransigence of the Contras, which had made demands for sweeping reforms that would effectively take

⁹³ “President’s February Request,” Memorandum, February 1988, 1, Box 702, Jim Wright Papers. Special Collections, Mary Coats Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.

the Sandinistas out of power, an obviously unreasonable request.⁹⁴ DSG argued that, should the resolution win approval in both houses, “the amount of direct and indirect contra aid since the peace process began six months ago would total more than \$89 million.” Instead, DSG touted its Democratic alternative, which would provide funds only for humanitarian aid.⁹⁵ Rep. Jim Slattery (D-KS) argued that “[t]he United States lacks the moral justification to pursue a military solution until diplomatic remedies have been exhausted.” He accused Reagan of failing to do all he could to resolve the conflict in Central America diplomatically and scolded the administration for not engaging in high level talks with Nicaragua since 1984 in Manzanillo, Mexico.⁹⁶

The Central American leaders also came out publicly against more Contra aid. Arias, winner of the Noble Peace Prize in 1987, argued that additional support of the Contras could give the Sandinistas a reason to avoid negotiations.⁹⁷ This line of thinking matched that of Dave McCurdy, who raised the concern that the aid proposed by the White House would actually give Ortega an excuse to back out of negotiations, and he asked his colleagues to vote down the president’s request.⁹⁸ Other leaders called it counterproductive to the peace process.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ “Reagan’s New Contra Aid Request,” Fact Sheet (Washington, D.C.: Democratic Study Group, U.S. House of Representatives, January 31, 1988), 2-3, Box 9, Dave McCurdy Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives.

⁹⁵ Reagan, “Request for Assistance for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance,” 1.

⁹⁶ Jim Slattery to Jim Wright, Letter, January 25, 1988, 1, Box 82, Jim Slattery Records, Kansas Historical Society.

⁹⁷ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 224.

⁹⁸ Dave McCurdy, “Contra Aid,” Statement, February 3, 1988, 3, Box 9, Dave McCurdy Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives.

⁹⁹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 223.

Grassroots organizing by NGOs fed the fire against Reagan's Contra policy. Nicaragua Network members engaged in demonstrations throughout the nation. On January 25, 1988, 170 demonstrations took place, in addition to phone banking and media events, all to pressure Congress members to vote against Contra aid in the February 3 vote. The Nicaragua Network considered February 3 a "watershed moment," claiming that if "contra aid is not stopped now, it is because the Democrats refused to kill it and we will have to face the challenge of 'all out war' in Nicaragua and a continued and deepened U.S. war policy towards Central America that is likely to extend to the next administration." The organization also set plans in motion for protests on February 4 in case it lost the vote, but the House voted down the president's proposal.¹⁰⁰

NGOs interpreted the February 3 vote as a vindication for their opposition to the Contras. CFNFP assessed the defeat as recognition in Congress that Nicaraguans, even those opposed to the Sandinista government, acknowledged that the country was stable and that the economic problems faced by the country came from the insurgency funded by the Reagan administration. The Coalition declared that Reagan had failed to dislodge the Sandinistas, and the Contras were left only with diplomatic negotiation.¹⁰¹ Days of Decision declared the effort to defeat Contra aid amounted to the "largest, most coordinated effort to date to stop contra aid," in which "over 100 national organizations representing labor unions, churches, and diverse communities

¹⁰⁰ Sylvia Sherman, Mass Mailing, January 21, 1988, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 6, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁰¹ John Burstein, "Contra Vote Is a Victory: House Supports Peace in Central America," *The Orlando Sentinel*, February 7, 1988, Folder WOLA Staff Publications, etc. 1987-88, Box 25, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

joined together to give voice to a U.S. public overwhelmingly opposed to war in Central America.”¹⁰² Hundreds of thousands committed to sending letters, making phone calls, and visiting their member of Congress. The religious and civil rights communities represented by the campaign looked “forward to supporting a U.S.- Central America policy based on diplomacy rather than deception and self-determination rather than military intervention. The Days of Decision release declared that the United States now needed help to disarm the Contra force and assist Nicaragua in returning guerrillas to society in a non-partisan manner.”¹⁰³

However, the Contra proponents kept pushing, and NGOs anticipated the Democrats offering their alternative funding bill as a compromise to proponents of the peace process and those who wanted to continue helping the Contras. The Days of Decision campaign wrote to prepare their members for the Democratic alternative, explaining that Congressional leadership had promised Democrats and moderate Republicans an alternative before they voted against the president’s proposal. Democrats wanted to offer a proposal to avoid the Republicans offering their own alternative that would certainly include lethal aid.¹⁰⁴ The consensus within Congress was that some form of funding would pass, so Democrats wanted to set the terms for how the administration used the money.

¹⁰² “The Voice of the American People Is Heard! Peace Prevails in Central America! - A Statement from the National Days of Decision Coalition,” Press Release (Washington, D.C.: Days of Decision, February 3, 1988), 1, Acc. 92A-042, Box 24, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

¹⁰⁴ Meg Ruby and Bill Spencer to Friend, Letter, February 6, 1988, 1, Acc. 92A-042, Box 24, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

4. The End of War Funding

The Democratic Study Group put forward an alternative funding bill as a compromise that advanced the peace process but did not abandon the Contras. NGOs came out against the compromise proposal in principle, contending that Congress could not have it both ways. However, activists also recognized that lawmakers feared that rejecting the Democratic plan would bring a more objectionable Republican alternative with which Congress would face immense pressure to pass just to get something done. NGOs and staunch Contra opponents in Congress held firm, intending to force the defeat of any funding bill, and, in doing so, motivated the Sandinistas and Contras to approach peace negotiations with a new sense of determination to bring the war to a close.

The fact that Democrats had defeated the president's proposal with a narrow eight-vote margin raised concerns among Democratic leadership that failing to adopt the DSG proposal would mean a certain victory for the Republican alternative waiting in the wings. Passing a Republican alternative with military aid included would further encourage the Contras to undermine the cease-fire agreement and peace process. DSG concluded that the Democratic alternative was the only viable option to preserve the Nicaragua peace process, and it would demonstrate to the Contras that Congress would approve no more military aid.¹⁰⁵

The House Democratic leadership, through the DSG, offered its alternative package for a vote on March 3, 1988. DSG claimed to represent a "spectrum of House Democrats" and had invited Republicans and the administration to participate

¹⁰⁵ Democratic Study Group to Central American Working Group, Letter, February 26, 1988, 1–2, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 6, Wisconsin Historical Society.

in drafting the alternative proposal, but both refused. The total aid package proposed by DSG consisted of \$30.8 million over four months. The package provided \$14.6 million for “sustenance aid,” which consisted of food and other necessities. The Defense Department, rather than the CIA, would administer the aid for the Contras and the House and Senate Intelligence Committees and the General Accounting Office would have access to aid sites for inspection. If the parties reached a cease-fire, aid delivery would be transferred to an international agency such as the International Red Cross. The bill offered no funding for weapons or ammunition for the Contras, it prevented the delivery of previously appropriated but undelivered military aid, and it contained no “non-lethal” aid that consisted of military equipment that supported the military operations of the Contras. The proposal earmarked \$14.6 million for treating injured children, while the president’s February 3 packaged contained no such aid, and it designated \$1.4 million for indigenous groups, which Reagan’s proposal also did not include.¹⁰⁶

Democrats correctly believed that resistance from human rights and anti-Contra groups jeopardized their plan. National organizations, including Witness for Peace, the Days of Decision campaign, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Jesuit Social Ministries, NETWORK: A Catholic Social Justice Lobby, and the Presbyterian Church all expressed their objection to the Democrats seeking money for the Contras for any purpose.¹⁰⁷ On February 26, 1988, DSG wrote to CAWG to

¹⁰⁶ “Fact Sheet: The Democratic Contra Aid Alternative” (Washington, D.C.: Democratic Study Group, U.S. House of Representatives, February 23, 1988), 1–3, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 6, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁰⁷ Jean Walsh, Director, Washington Office Witness for Peace, to Member of Congress, Letter, February 26, 1988, Box 27, Folder: Democratic Contra Alternative, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University; Meg Ruby and Mary Cassell, National Staff Days of Decision, to Friends, Letter, February 28, 1988, Box

ease the pressure from CAWG's member organizations demanding Democrats vote against the bill. DSG conceded that the bill did not go as far as they wanted and acknowledged that CAWG members expected more. DSG wrote that "[t]he bill does something that we... have consistently and strongly opposed for the past several years. It provides aid to the contras in the form of food, clothing, medical supplies, and shelter, and it provides that aid without cessation of the hostilities condition that we wanted to impose." However, DSG still looked for CAWG's support on the bill because "realities leave us no choice." Lawmakers explained that defeating the DSG alternative might set the table for Congress passing the Republicans' proposal.¹⁰⁸

In March 1988, Congressional leadership expressed its approval of the peace proposal while also advocating for Contra opponents to support the Democratic alternative to military funding of the Contras. Senate Majority Leader Tom Foley, Majority Whip Tony Coelho (D-CA), and Deputy Majority Whip David E. Bonior (D-MI) addressed a letter to "Contra Aid Opponent" in which they shared their hope for a new "partnership [between the United States and Central America] based on peace and democracy, instead of war and retribution." They argued that the February 3 rejection of Contra aid in the House represented a "critical first step toward peace and reconciliation in Central America." The next step in the process required Congress passing DSG's alternative aid package on March 3 to prevent further

27, Folder: Democratic Contra Alternative, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University; Friends Committee on National Legislation et al. to Representative, Letter, February 24, 1988, Box 27, Folder: Democratic Contra Alternative, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

¹⁰⁸ George Miller et al. to Member Organizations, Central American Working Group, Letter, February 26, 1988, 1-2, Box 702, Jim Wright Papers. Special Collections, Mary Coats Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.

military aid. Leadership referenced the close vote, arguing that “[t]he narrow margin in Congress against military aid cannot be sustained if this assistance is defeated.” Furthermore, with the Republican bill, even non-lethal assistance could be used for military operations and to support additional Contra fighting, and the CIA would administer aid. Reagan would also be able to request a vote on additional military aid within forty-five days and, according to leadership, likely receive the aid requested.¹⁰⁹

After nearly a decade of lobbying by NGOs, the Democrats recognized the difficulty for these organizations in accepting a proposal that included more Contra aid. Democrats had also adopted the rights language of NGOs in the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse when they assured activists that “[w]e are committed to the principle of self-determination for all the people of Central America. We believe U.S. policy must work to bind the wounds of war and to address the social and economic inequalities in the region. Toward that end, we must continue to work with all the Central American nations to support the principles outlined in the Guatemala peace agreement.” However, for this bill, Democrats asked the anti-Contra groups for compromise and for their full support to continue the peace process.¹¹⁰

NGOs opposed to Contra funding struggled to guide their members regarding the DSG proposal. The Nicaragua Network noted that DSG and the Republican substitute aid package would provide some form of aid to the Contras, whether lethal or not, that would enable them to continue fighting. However, the organization

¹⁰⁹ Thomas S. Foley, Tony Coelho, and David E. Bonior to Contra Aid Opponent, Letter, March 1, 1988, 1, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 6, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

acknowledged that “there are other factors at play” that Contra aid opponents must consider with respect to long-term strategy for ending the war.¹¹¹ Quest for Peace condemned the choice between two bad alternatives, and it informed members of Congress that it would not support either piece of legislation. However, Quest for Peace would not seek “any retribution” against lawmakers who voted for the Democratic alternative, understanding that many Contra aid opponents were concerned about what else might pass if the Democratic alternative failed.¹¹² Likewise, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. and other religious organizations condemned both proposals, but they believed the peace process could proceed even if the Democratic bill passed.¹¹³ Witness for Peace refused to accept any form of aid to the Contras that enabled them to continue their indiscriminate killing of civilians, but Director Jean Walsh stated that “we will understand your decision” if members of Congress voted for the Democratic plan.¹¹⁴ WOLA supported the Democratic alternative as an important step along a non-military path to resolving the conflict in Central America and turn away from Reagan’s focus on military solutions. Alexander Wilde, writing to members of Congress on behalf of WOLA, acknowledged that even humanitarian aid to the Contras enabled them to continue “the crimes of a war we have long deplored,” but passing the proposal from the

¹¹¹ “Nicaragua Network Position on March 3 Contra Aid Vote” (Nicaragua Network, 1988), 2, Nicaragua Network Records, Box 6, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹¹² Mauree Fielder Legislative Coordinator, Quest for Peace to Representative, Letter, March 1, 1988, 1, Box 27, Folder: Democratic Contra Alternative, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

¹¹³ Friends Committee on National Legislation et al. to Representative, February 24, 1988.

¹¹⁴ Walsh, Director, Washington Office Witness for Peace, to Member of Congress, February 26, 1988.

Democrats prevented an even worse proposal from Republicans and the president.¹¹⁵ Days of Decision called the vote “one of the most agonizing decisions since the beginning of the contra war.”¹¹⁶

Paul Reichler, an attorney who represented the government of Nicaragua at the ICJ and in negotiations with the Contras for the cease-fire, disputed the framing of the question and spoke with human rights advocates about the current state of the Contras and the status of peace negotiations. Reichler stated that the Nicaraguan security forces had all but defeated the Contras, and only 4,200 guerrilla fighters remained in the field while their leadership continued to splinter. The air defense of the Nicaraguan government prevented most supplies from reaching the Contras, and the army was squeezing the Contras toward a cease-fire. Military aid, whether called lethal or non-lethal by Congress, would embolden the Contras, raise their hopes for additional military aid, and lead to an escalation of the fighting. Reichler argued that Congress must defeat proposals that include any form of Contra aid.¹¹⁷

Based on Reichler’s statements and its own assessment of the circumstances in Washington, the Nicaragua Network resolved to oppose any aid for the Contras and to demand that Congress take responsibility for ending the war without engaging in half-measures or compromises. However, the Nicaragua Network softened its position somewhat by calling on Contra aid opponents to allow members of Congress to vote in favor of the DSG alternative in the face of complex

¹¹⁵ Alexander Wilde to Member of Congress, Letter, March 1, 1988, 1–2, Box 27, Folder: Democratic Contra Alternative, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

¹¹⁶ Ruby and Cassell, National Staff Days of Decision, to Friends, February 28, 1988.

¹¹⁷ “Nicaragua Network Position on March 3 Contra Aid Vote,” 2–3.

circumstances and long-term goals of the anti-intervention movement. In furtherance of its own anti-intervention advocacy, the organization called for activists to demand Congress to take steps to end the war and for lawmakers to take strong public stands against allowing the war and Contra support to continue. It also called on members of Congress to stop arguing over the level of aid for the Contras and how the aid should be categorized. The terms of the debate and Contra opposition should shift to “refuting and exposing the Reagan Administration’s lies about Nicaragua and denouncing all contra atrocities” while preventing any more aid for the Contras and demanding bilateral talks to resolve the conflict.¹¹⁸

Liberals in Congress maintained a principled stand and refused to compromise to the benefit of the Contras.¹¹⁹ The House defeated the Democratic aid proposal and the Republican proposal.¹²⁰ In defeating additional Contra aid, NGOs forced Congress to deliver a message to the Nicaraguans that the United States might provide humanitarian aid in the future, which it did, but also that the United States would no longer fund the war effort, whether through military aid or supposed non-lethal aid that served as critical supplies to a fighting force.¹²¹ Military aid ran out on February 28.¹²²

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁹ Susan F. Rasky, “House, in a Surprise, Defeats Democrats’ Contra Aid Bill; All U.S. Funds Now Halted,” *The New York Times*, March 4, 1988, sec. A, LexisNexis Academic.

¹²⁰ “Hill-Reagan Contra Tug-of-War: A Chronology”; “Nicaraguan Cease-Fire Assistance,” Fact Sheet (Washington, D.C.: Democratic Study Group, U.S. House of Representatives, March 29, 1988), 2, Box 82, Jim Slattery congressional records, Kansas Historical Society.

¹²¹ “Nicaraguan Cease-Fire Assistance,” 1.

¹²² “Contra-Sandinista Talks Move Slowly,” *Latin America Update*, May 1988, 6, Box 30, WOLA [Early docs] 2 of 2, Washington Office on Latin America Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

After Congress failed to act, the Sandinistas and the Contras met in the town of Sapoá on March 21, 1988 and signed an agreement on March 23. Defense Minister Humberto Ortega led the government delegation and Adolfo Calero led the Contra delegation. Though Ortega and Calero seemed to work together in a reasonable, pragmatic way, their hardline constituents opposed any agreement. The failure by Congress to approve additional Contra military aid motivated the parties, particularly the Contras, to compromise.¹²³

The Sapoá agreement fulfilled a part of the agreement reached at Esquipulas in 1987 and established a sixty-day cease-fire starting April 1, 1988, while negotiations continued over a permanent cease-fire. The Contras would move to cease-fire zones by April 15. The Nicaraguan government granted amnesty to political prisoners, including former members of the National Guard. The agreement prevented the Contras from receiving any foreign aid except food, clothing, shelter, and medical supplies and only from non-partisan organizations. The government agreed to recognize freedom of expression and political participation for Nicaraguans, including the Contras. An independent commission headed by Cardinal Obando y Bravo and OAS Secretary General João Soares would verify the cease-fire.¹²⁴ The parties generally followed the Sapoá agreement, but setbacks did happen. Reports showed that both sides violated the cease-fire agreement with some five or six occurrences, but no one submitted any formal complaint. Both sides seemed to

¹²³ “Nicaraguan Cease-Fire Assistance,” 1.

¹²⁴ “Nicaraguan Cease-Fire Assistance,” 1-2.

acknowledge that maintaining the cease-fire would be difficult, even when both sides acted in good faith.¹²⁵

5. Conclusion

NGOs used the ongoing peace negotiations and the Iran-Contra scandal to successfully reframe the issue of Contra support against the administration and help bring the Contra War to an end. The Contra War was a symptom of a larger ailment embedded in U.S. political culture that prioritized geopolitical strategy over human rights. With respect to Iran-Contra, activists argued that the Reagan administration circumvented the political process and Congressional oversight, violated federal and international law, and disregarded human rights concerns to pursue a reckless foreign policy. To fully address counterrevolution in Nicaragua and U.S. foreign policy of the future, CFNFP and other NGOs determined that activists needed to address the political culture institutionalized in Washington.

The success of Days of Decision reflected the importance of activism in creating change in American politics, but the Contra War created a unique set of circumstances for activism. As the peace process moved along and the Iran-Contra scandal weakened the administration, the investigations and reporting of WOLA and AW and the testimony in Congress combined the grassroots mobilization. The influence of thousands of potential voters and massive demonstrations and the

¹²⁵ "Peace Plan Monitor: Cease-Fire Talks Progress in Nicaragua" (Washington, D.C.: Washington Office on Latin America, April 15, 1988), 3, Acc. 92A-042, Box 19, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (DG 138), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

strength of the human rights-based arguments against the Contras helped persuade Congress to terminate any more funding of the Contra War.

After the signing of the peace agreement, U.S.-Nicaragua relations had moved to something different, a relationship not influenced by militarism. NGOs still argued in support of Nicaraguan sovereignty and self-determination, but that version of human rights never took hold in Washington. Reagan's hardline application of the Democratic Human Rights discourse did not prevail in the Nicaragua context, but lawmakers still had not fully embraced the expanded bundle of rights guaranteed in Anticolonial Human Rights. Activists would keep working.

CONCLUSION AND EPILOGUE

When Ronald Reagan won the presidency in 1980, human rights advocates feared that he would reverse the gains made throughout the previous decade. Members of Congress, frustrated with years of U.S. foreign interventions, had worked to institutionalize human rights in the federal government. Similarly, activists believed the 1970s represented the beginning of something new in international relations, the start of a movement to hold governments accountable for deprivations of the liberty, dignity, and life of individuals in violation of accepted norms as articulated through international covenants and conventions beginning with the UDHR. Reagan as a candidate and then as president did minimize the importance of human rights, considering them secondary to winning the Cold War.

Reagan's Nicaragua policy magnified a philosophical dispute over human rights in U.S. foreign policy and in international human rights discourse that had been developing since World War II. The UDHR and related covenants and norms embraced rights of economic security, cultural identity, self-determination, and social security, in addition to political and civil rights—what this study has called the Anticolonial Human Rights discourse. The Sandinistas and opposition parties in Nicaragua put forth an Anticolonial Human Rights discourse with respect to the future of Nicaragua. After decades of foreign influence, Nicaraguans sought self-determination and respect for Nicaraguan sovereignty.

In parallel, the United States articulated a Democratic Human Rights discourse that correlated with Cold War geopolitics. Human rights and Cold War

objectives were intertwined in U.S. foreign policy from the 1950s through the end of the Cold War in 1991, with a brief reordering of priorities in the 1970s with Carter. Democratic Human Rights valued above all others those political and civil rights associated with a functioning democracy. With these rights would naturally flow economic and social equality, respect for cultural identity, and other social safety nets, if the electorate chose to implement them.

Democratic Human Rights protected choice and enforced government inaction. Alternatively, Anticolonial Human Rights maintained government protections and social benefits. The differences in interpretations of human rights and the role of government in society underpinned the conflict between the United States and Nicaragua once the Sandinistas took power in 1979, but those differences did not lead to war. Reagan's backing of guerrillas brought war to Nicaragua.

Nicaragua presented a unique set of facts that exacerbated the tension over human rights. Unlike relations with authoritarian governments in Latin America or elsewhere, in Nicaragua President Reagan pursued a policy of collaboration with what he considered an anti-communist guerrilla insurgency. That insurgency consisted of, in part, the remnants of Somoza's hated National Guard. In funding the Contras, Reagan advanced a policy of destabilizing a sitting government through a civil war to force democratic reforms that would serve human rights. Nicaraguans argued that this policy constituted U.S. imperialism and violated Nicaraguan self-determination and sovereignty as the Sandinistas implemented reforms to improve economic conditions, to raise the quality of health care, and generally improve the quality of life.

NGO resistance to Reagan's Contra policy focused on stopping intervention into Nicaraguan politics. NGOs formed a resistance movement initially against what they saw as Reagan's withdrawal from human rights norms and his refusal to consider human rights as a guiding principle for US foreign policy. Although the anti-Contra movement started small, by late 1984, activists intervened in the Nicaragua debate to the extent that the White House reframed its Contra policy as one fulfilling human rights. NGOs successfully brought human rights into the discussion and then turned the debate around to brand the Contras and the Reagan administration as the ones violating human rights. This rhetorical shift was a major achievement of 1980s NGOs.

To be sure, activists took advantage of external factors. Evidence of the mining of Nicaraguan harbors, the discovery of the CIA manual for torture and assassination, and the Iran-Contra Affair, for instance, undercut the argument that the president and the Contras stood for human rights. Those external factors proved essential to offer as evidence that supporting human rights in Nicaragua was not consistent with backing the Contras.

NGO activism for Nicaragua did not start in 1980 fully formed and capable or inclined to deploy a national grassroots campaign. It took time, it took failures from which to learn, and it took consistent networking to build a nationwide campaign among local organizations and activists. The anti-Contra movement also did not begin in 1980 by seriously contemplating turning issue-oriented activism and organizing into a broad-based effort to change the entire philosophy of U.S. foreign relations. This study is one of adaptation and evolution as activists pursued the most

effective methods for delivering a morally compelling case that would stop a policy of violence they abhorred. The culmination of their human rights activism came with the Days of Decision campaign that brought together thousands of activists across the country. Only through such massive display of opposition to the Contras could activists move Congress because they could not hope to change the mind of the president. The detailed analyses of WOLA, AW, and AI based on first-hand investigations and interviews by respected, highly-credentialed individuals had almost no influence by themselves on Congress, other than offering lawmakers of both sides additional talking points. The mass mobilization of activists energized by the human rights reporting turned the tide against the Contras.

In the mid-1980s, NGOs could see that fact-based analysis of Nicaragua made little difference in Washington. If anything, NGOs involved in human rights reporting found themselves the targets of political attacks from the White House and private Contra supporters. These attacks threatened to shut down the open, robust debate surrounding Nicaragua policy. Yet, when the administration or intelligence officers acted in the name of democracy and anti-communism, anything seemed possible. Despite the human rights reporting and the testimony before Congress, the prevailing human rights narrative cast the Sandinistas on the side of totalitarianism and repression, leaving the armed opposition, the Contras, fighting for freedom and democracy, and, therefore, standing for human rights.

NGOs concluded that grassroots activism combined with direct lobbying offered the best opportunity to create change. As WOLA, Amnesty International, and Americas Watch published and presented their reports trying to correct the public

record, the Nicaraguan Network and CFNFP worked against the Contra War through grassroots activism and lobbying delegations. They mobilized and articulated their message through numbers as thousands took part in demonstrations, letter-writing, office visits, and other tactics throughout the country to communicate opposition to their representatives in Congress. Activists interpreted the peace process as a human rights failure by the president because he offered no regional leadership, seemed to stand in the way of peace, and wanted to continue funding the war. Constituents demanded something different. NGOs also interpreted the Iran-Contra Affair as evidence of an administration with no moral compass and no interest in human rights. The scandal received much press for the violations of law and the sensational accounts of NSC staffers shredding documents. NGOs revealed the episode as symbolic of the extreme measures the administration took in furtherance of a Democratic Human Rights discourse. North, Poindexter, and MacFarlane all operated with the intent of bringing democracy to Nicaragua. The ends justified the means.

Grassroots activism helped to turn the country and Congress against additional military aid for the Contras, but it took until 1987 to accomplish the goal. The process of building the anti-Contra movement and working against the accepted Cold War narrative took time. By the final year of Reagan's term in office, Congress was no longer willing to fund the war in light of the abysmal human rights record of the Contras and the lack of trust in Reagan. In early 1988, that message convinced the Contras to enter negotiations and sign a cease-fire.

After 1988, Contra funding no longer enjoyed strong support in Washington, and U.S. adversaries lost their drive to push the issue. The interests and abilities of Washington, Havana, and Moscow for continuing to support their respective proxies in the Nicaraguan civil war declined. The Iran-Contra Affair, the conclusion of the peace agreement and cease-fire by Nicaraguans, and the constant raising of human rights issues by NGOs turned Contra military funding into a toxic issue of which the new administration of George H. W. Bush wanted no part.¹ Bush did not have the same approach to foreign policy nor the same passion for aggressive confrontation with the Soviets as did Reagan, and he had no interest in fighting with Congress over Nicaragua. Bush approached Nicaragua seeking a middle ground by looking for a way to provide humanitarian aid to the Contras that did not further their insurgency or encourage them to break the cease-fire. He did this initially through a bipartisan humanitarian aid package passed by Congress in April 1989. The funding bill prohibited covert action to provide funds to Contras for military or paramilitary operations, and it barred administering aid to any group that retained an individual who engaged in human rights violations or drug smuggling.²

The Sandinistas and the Contras met for the National Dialogue on August 3 and 4, 1989, in Managua where they signed a permanent agreement. The agreement scheduled elections for president and vice-president on February 25, 1990. The agreement confirmed amnesty for Contras and called on other nations to end covert actions that might interfere with the elections. The agreement called for a free

¹ Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism*, 164–71.

² “Contra-Aid Provisions,” *Congressional Quarterly*, April 15, 1989, 835, Box 9, Dave McCurdy Collection, 1981-1996, Carl Albert Center Archives.

electoral process for Nicaraguans and established a process of national reconciliation, enacting laws to reduce restrictions on civil liberties and reforming the judicial and penal system.³

In October 1989, Congress appropriated aid for the Bush administration to fund opposition candidates for the Nicaraguan elections. Congress approved the aid believing that language in the legislation and personal assurances from the administration closed the door on any more covert action by the CIA. This was a mission to influence the election through foreign money and politics.⁴ Congress gave the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) authority to determine how best to use the funds in accordance with the law against aid going to any candidates for public office.⁵

The Nicaragua Network and other NGOs tried to counter the covert work of the Bush administration intervening in the Nicaraguan elections to tip the scale in favor of opposition candidates. However, activists did not have the same level of influence after the Nicaraguans signed a peace agreement ending the violence. Activists argued that U.S. covert aid to interfere in Nicaragua democracy contradicted U.S. conceptions of political freedom and human rights. Implementing a ban on covert aid would deliver a message to the world that the United States supported free elections in Nicaragua.⁶ These arguments were nuanced and based on

³ "Political Agreement" August 4, 1989, 1–3, Center for Democracy, Box 323, Hoover Institution Archives.

⁴ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 235–38.

⁵ "Special Alert: Funds for the Nicaraguan Opposition" (Washington, D.C.: Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, October 6, 1989), 2, Acc. 95A-074, Box 1, Latin America Working Group Records (DG 184), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁶ Bill Spencer, Director, Central America Working Group, and Joy Olsen, Legislative Coordinator, Central America Working Group, to House Intelligence Committee, "Re: Covert Actions Around the

legal principles and not the evidence of atrocities or the strength of thousands of grassroots activists. NGOs in this instance failed to influence Congress.

The effects of U.S. intervention on the 1990 elections were hard to measure, but the incumbent for president, Daniel Ortega, running with the support of a far stronger political organization than his opponent, lost the election. Former Junta member Violetta Chamorro won with fifty-five percent of the vote.⁷ The loss also may have had much to do with the state of the Nicaraguan economy and Nicaraguan society after years of rebellion against the Somoza regime followed by nearly ten years of guerrilla warfare with the Contras. The inability of the Sandinistas to fully deliver on the promises of the revolution damaged the party's chances in the election. Nicaraguans wanted change. The weak economy concerned voters, and a large number expressed concern regarding FSLN economic policies going forward.⁸ The people suffered from war, poverty, and inflation while they watched the Sandinista leadership maintain their wealth, leading to simmering resentment toward the revolutionary government. UNO and Chamorro benefited from being something different from the Sandinista regime.⁹

After the 1990 election, the FSLN remained a viable political party but drifted away from its revolutionary leftist policies. Daniel Ortega prepared to make his comeback.

Nicaraguan Electoral Process," Letter, July 31, 1989, 1, Acc. 95A-074, Box 5, Latin America Working Group Records (DG 184), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁷ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 235–38.

⁸ "Press Release: Nicaragua National Election Survey Shows Ortega with Growing Lead" (Washington, D.C.: Greenberg Lake, The Analysis Group Inc., January 24, 1990), 4, Center for Democracy Papers, Box 323, Hoover Institution Archives.

⁹ Brands, 215-19.

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APPENDIX: ABBREVIATIONS

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| ACLU | American Civil Liberties Union |
| ADREN | Alianza Democrática Revolucionaria Nicaragüense |
| AI | Amnesty International |
| ANPDH | Asociación Nicaragüense Pro-Derechos Humanos |
| AW | Americas Watch |
| CAWG | Coalition for a New Foreign Policy's Central America Working Group |
| CFNFP | Coalition for a New Foreign Policy |
| CIA | Central Intelligence Agency |
| CPDH | Comisión Permanente de Derechos Humanos |
| DSG | Democratic Study Group |
| FDN | Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense |
| FOG | Coalition for a New Foreign Policy's Field Organizing Group |
| FSLN | Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional |
| ICJ | International Court of Justice |
| NED | National Endowment for Democracy |
| NSC | National Security Council |
| OAS | Organization of American States |
| UDHR | Universal Declaration of Human Rights |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNIR | Unidad Nicaragüense de Reconciliación |

UNO

Unidad Nicaragüense Opositora

WOLA

Washington Office on Latin America