

UNUSUAL CAMPAIGN: NGOS' LONG BATTLE  
TO END CONTRA AID

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of Paul Thomas Dean find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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# UNUSUAL CAMPAIGN: NGOS' LONG BATTLE

## TO END CONTRA AID

### Abstract

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In April 1985 the Reagan administration asked for \$14 million in nonmilitary Contra aid. The House of Representatives rejected the request by a vote of 215 to 213. Shocked CIA director William Casey credited non-governmental organizations (NGOs) saying, "If Tip O'Neill didn't have Maryknoll nuns who wrote letters, we would have a contra program." The Reagan administration's efforts to discredit, harass, and undermine various NGO's throughout the 1980s showed how powerful they believed the movement of NGOs to be. Finally, after the House of Representatives narrowly voted down renewed funding for the Contras in February 1988, both the leaders of the anti-Contra aid and the Contra aid backers credited or blamed NGOs for the defeat of Contra funding. This study examines how and why NGOs were able to play a decisive role in the decision making of United States foreign policy over the Sandinista-Contra conflict in Nicaragua. This study defines NGOs as a non-state actor who attempted to influence United States foreign policy, and focuses on NGOs that were propelled by altruism rather than profit. Some of these groups were formed specifically to influence United States foreign policy. Others believed that influencing foreign policy fit within their preexisting purposes to work for the peace and prosperity of citizens of every nation. After years of trial and error these religious and humanitarian organizations found that they could influence United States

foreign policy with a mixture of grass roots organizing, strategic alliances with political parties, and targeted political pressure.

This study primarily utilized the papers of Democrat Representative David Bonior and House Speaker, Tip O'Neill, who kept extensive records of the efforts of various NGOs who worked to change US foreign policy. It also examined published works from members of the Reagan Administration, debates in congress, US government publications, and influential US periodicals who reported on the major actors of the US policy toward Nicaragua as Congressional debates unfolded.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“If Tip O’Neill didn’t have Maryknoll nuns who wrote letters, we would have a Contra program.”

William Casey, 1986

The primary objective of this dissertation is to demonstrate that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) played a decisive role in United States foreign policy during the Sandinista-Contra<sup>1</sup> conflict in Nicaragua. For the purpose of this study I will define an NGO as a non-state actor who attempts to influence United States foreign policy. Books like *Bitter Fruit* have shown that NGOs can and do influence United States foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> For this study I will concentrate on NGOs that were primarily propelled by humanitarian causes rather than profit. Some of these groups were formed specifically to influence United States foreign policy: for example, Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), Witness for Peace, and Countdown 87. Others, like individual churches and denominations, believed that influencing foreign policy fit within their preexisting purposes to work for the peace and prosperity of citizens of every nation. After years of

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<sup>1</sup> Short for *Contra-revolucionarios*. There is some difference of opinion on whether Contras should be capitalized. Typically the word is not capitalized when it is used more as a description than an entity. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, it makes sense to capitalize the word because the group of those who opposed the Sandinistas eventually became an entity and were commonly referred to as *the* Contras in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Schlesinger, and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*. (New York: Doubleday, 1983). The business NGO that influenced United States foreign policy in this case was the United Fruit Company.

trial and error these religious and humanitarian organizations found that they could influence United States foreign policy with a mixture of grass roots organizing, strategic alliances with political parties, and targeted political pressure.

During the Reagan administration the battle over Contra aid filled the halls of Congress, the pages and broadcasts of various media venues, and the streets of United States cities. The Central American peace movement of the 1980s alone mobilized more than one hundred thousand United States citizens to contest United States interference in Nicaragua.<sup>3</sup> The Congress, divided and contentious, split along dueling paradigms liberal Democrats who refused to allow another “Vietnam,” and conservative Republicans who would not let an appeasement-centered foreign policy permit another “Cuba,” or “Iran.” The Vietnam War had shattered the bipartisan ideological consensus that had supported U.S. foreign policy since World War II, and the fight over military support for Nicaraguan Contras brought that fact to the forefront. The ideologically charged and desperate setting poisoned political discourse and justified frequent blurring of traditional spheres of power. Democrats in Congress appeared willing to forge their own foreign policy, and members of the Reagan administration blatantly disregarded legislation. Despite President Ronald Reagan’s popularity, and the impressive amount of political capital he spent on the issue, he was unable to triumph completely over the various anti-Contra coalitions. The Contra issue throughout the 1980s remained poorly understood and unpopular with the United States general public. The average citizen did not understand the connection between the Communist Sandinistas and the broader Cold War

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<sup>3</sup> Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) xvi.

concerns, but they opposed the idea of sending American troops to Nicaragua. They were not certain whether or not the Contras were freedom fighters or left over thugs from the previous Nicaraguan government, but they were sure that they opposed needless human suffering, and responded in extraordinary ways when confronted with descriptions of collateral damage relayed by concerned NGOs.

Scholars examined different actors in the complicated struggle even while the battle raged. Their works described various disturbing aspects of the Contra-Sandinista struggle, including the manipulation of media and the well publicized covert nature of the United States involvement. Like the majority of Latin Americanists during the conflict, most of the books published in the 1980s were generally critical of the Reagan administration's policies, and advocated a more "sensible and humane" approach.<sup>4</sup> However the literature failed to describe or make sense of dynamic events and changing circumstances.

After the fall of the Sandinistas, several books came out analyzing the traditional actors in the events in Nicaragua. Richard Sobel in, *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy*, examined the role of public opinion on Contra funding. He discovered that the public was decisively against Contra aid, but that Congress typically voted for the aid anyway, albeit with significant restraints. Public opinion did limit President Reagan's options in policy decisions as Congress acted as an intermediary between the president

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<sup>4</sup> A sampling of the literature published in the 1980s would include: Thomas W. Walker, (ed) *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987). Nora Hamilton, Jeffrey A. Frieden, Linda Fuller, and Manuel Pastor Jr. (eds.) *Crisis in Central America: Regional Dynamics and U.S. Policy in the 1980s*, (Boulder: Westview, 1988). Richard Fagen, *Forging Peace: The Challenge of Central America*, (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

and the public. Sobel noted that the lobbying groups had a limited effect on the outcomes of the 1985-86 congressional voting.<sup>5</sup> However, this dissertation will demonstrate that the anti-Contra lobbying groups learned their lessons from their many failures in the past and succeeded in changing key swing votes in order to end Contra aid in early 1988.

In *U.S. Sandinista Diplomatic Relations*, David Ryan examines traditional power struggles among Nations during the 1980s and early 1990s. He concluded that the Reagan Administration was intolerant and exaggerated the threat of Sandinista expansionism. He further notes that its refusal to compromise with the Sandinistas led to needless bloodshed and misery. Ryan also concludes that Reagan's inability to persuade the United States public and Congress led to the loss of Contra aid and indirectly then to the Iran-Contra scandal. According to Ryan, the Iran-Contra scandal, and the resulting loss of prestige for hardliners opened the door for more constructive peace talks. Regarding the causal factors for the key vote in February 1988 Ryan concludes that the Sandinista strategy of strategic concessions perpetuated negotiations and defused the momentum toward massive aid to the Contras.<sup>6</sup> While acknowledging Ryan's valuable insight concerning negotiations between the United States and Nicaragua, this dissertation will propose that key swing votes were changed by NGO lobbying rather than the symbolic and elusive promises made by the Sandinistas in late 1987.

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<sup>5</sup> Sobel, Richard, *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy*, (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), 269-271.

<sup>6</sup> David Ryan, *US-Sandinista Diplomatic Relations*, (New York: St Martins, 1995) 147. Ryan quotes Goodfellow and Morrell, "From Contadora to Esquipulas," p. 383.

Robert Kagan, speechwriter for Secretary of State George Shultz, and member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, put together an impressive narrative based on newspaper reports, books by experts on the inside workings of the Sandinista National Directorate, interviews with key participants, memoirs of Shultz, and recently declassified documents of the National Security Archives. In *Twilight Struggle*, Kagan looks at the major political actors in the policy decisions regarding Central America. He primarily considers the actions of Speaker Jim Wright, President Reagan, Secretary of State Shultz, and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega. He examines the political maneuvering of the anti-Contra and pro-Contra forces, but did not consider the Nicaragua Task Force, or NGOs as a significant factor in the 1988 vote.<sup>7</sup> Based on sources available in 1996, these conclusions are justified. However, Kagan did not have access to the lists of swing voters targeted by Countdown 87, or the effort to defeat Contra funding by an alliance of NGOs, which proved to be decisive on the critical 3 February 1988 vote.

The most comprehensive study of the U.S. Central America peace movement was *Resisting Reagan*, by Christian Smith. Smith successfully describes many of the major groups involved in organized resistance to Reagan's Central American policies. Smith argues that the peace movement was unable to stop the Contra war in Nicaragua.

However, the movement was able to prevent a full-scale U.S. invasion of Nicaragua and forced the administration into resorting to illegal means of funding its policy in Central America. The peace movement also brought information to light that helped to destroy the reputation and effectiveness of many Reagan Administration officials, which in time

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua 1977-1990*, (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 577-582.

helped to derail many of the administration's policies and initiatives.<sup>8</sup> While building on much of Smith's work, this dissertation will focus more specifically on the activities of Congressman David Bonior, the Nicaragua Task Force, and Countdown 87, which together were able to defeat Contra funding in 1988.

In order to prove that NGOs played a decisive factor in United States foreign policy this dissertation utilizes the papers of Democratic Representative David Bonior. Bonior was a Democratic member of the Michigan State House of Representatives from 1973 to 1976. In 1976, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Michigan's 12th District for the Ninety-fifth and to the twelve succeeding Congresses, serving from January 3, 1977 to January 3, 2003. After redistricting resulting from the 1990 U.S. Census, he represented Michigan's 10th District from 1993 to 2003. He served as Majority Whip in the 102nd and 103rd Congresses. He was Minority Whip for the 104th through 107th Congresses. Bonior chose not to run in the 2002 election when his district was eliminated due to the redistricting following the 2000 U.S. Census.<sup>9</sup> Throughout his career he paid close attention to U.S. involvement in Latin America. Driven by a distrust of the presidency born of Watergate, and a determination not to let America get involved in "another Vietnam," Bonior became heavily involved in the anti-Contra aid Nicaragua Task Force. As part of this task force David Bonior made several trips to Nicaragua during the Sandinista-Contra conflict, and stayed in constant contact with NGOs who opposed United States support of the Contras. His consistent opposition

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<sup>8</sup> Christian Smith , *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 365-372.

<sup>9</sup> Biographical directory of the United States Congress.

was directed at the human rights abuses by the Contras, which were extensively documented by Washington Office on Latin America, America's Watch, Amnesty International, and Witness for Peace. Bonior and these NGOs forged an influential coalition that played a decisive role in defeating Contra aid. The NGOs provided him rhetorical information for speeches in congress, evidence of military atrocities, and a considerable supply of grassroots activists ready to work phones, picket lines, and pens in order to pressure swing voters to oppose Contra aid. Through trial and error Bonior and a coalition of NGOs developed a successful strategy that eventually led to the defeat of military funding for Contras in February 1988. Included in Bonior's papers were the extensive documentation of the critical Countdown '87 effort which proved to be a decisive factor for the defeat of Contra funding in 1988.

This examination of non-traditional actors in history is part of a larger trend. Harvard historian Akira Iriye considers NGOs worthy of significant inquiry. In "A Century of NGOs" he focuses on the far-reaching effects of non-governmental organizations. He defines these organizations as "voluntary and open (non-secret) associations of individuals outside of the formal state apparatus (central and local governments, police and armed forces, legislative and judicial bodies, etc.) that are neither for profit nor engage in political activities as their primary objective."<sup>10</sup> Iriye concludes that these organizations significantly changed public opinion in key areas, and played an important role in American history. Iriye also illustrates the achievements of international NGOs (INGOs): they provide humanitarian relief, educational efforts, and

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<sup>10</sup> Akira Iriye, "A Century of NGOs," *Diplomatic History*, 23 (Summer 1999) 422.

environmental efforts. They also strive to secure civil liberties for women, children, and persecuted minorities. Iriye argues that this type of influence wielded by INGOs is likely to continue as globalizing tendencies continue and citizens become increasingly disillusioned with their governments.

As will be shown in the following chapters, the straightforward and achievable goal of affecting public opinion, legislation, and foreign policy was pursued by American led NGOs who sought to change U.S. foreign policy with Nicaragua in the turbulent 1980s.

## CHAPTER 2

### PRESIDENT REAGAN'S CONTRA POLICY

Morris H. Morley persuasively argues that the United States had a consistent policy toward Central America from the 1950s until the 1980s. According to Morley,

The practice of contemporary U.S. policy toward Latin America is shaped by three broad-based concerns: support for open economies and development strategies that accord private foreign banking and investment capital a key role; support for regimes prepared to align themselves with efforts to contain, and even roll back, the forces of national and social revolution; and a determination to safeguard America's strategic and "national security" interests in conformity with regional and global goals.<sup>1</sup>

Morley suggests that the United States was typically concerned with maintaining the status quo. If the regime that ruled a particular state was no longer able to control its populace, or challenged the permanent interests, the United States was willing to change regimes, but strove to maintain the familiar state structure.<sup>2</sup>

In order to preserve the state structure in Nicaragua the United States had intervened on several occasions. In 1909 the United States assisted the Conservative party in overthrowing Liberal nationalist president Jose Santos Zelaya. U.S. troops occupied Nicaragua from 1912-1925 and from 1926 to 1933 in order to keep pro-American governments in power. During this second occupation the United States

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<sup>1</sup> Morris H. Morley, *Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas: State and Regime in U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua, 1969-1981*, (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1994) 1. Morley defines a state as a set of institutions produced by the interaction of dominant classes, and the interrelation between classes, the permanent civil and military bureaucracy, the judiciary, and economic institutions. Regimes are simply policy makers who work within the state processes.

<sup>2</sup> Morley, *Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas*, 2.

created the Nicaraguan National Guard to preserve stability and ensure that the people in power remained pro-United States. One of these guardsmen, Anastasio Somoza Garcia, took power and with U.S. assistance his family maintained control of Nicaragua until 1979.<sup>3</sup>

Somoza was eventually overthrown by a popular Marxist group, the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN). Although initially unsuccessful, the Sandinistas gained popularity as Somoza's rule became more harsh, and the Catholic Clergy began organizing and raising the political awareness of the masses. While President Jimmy Carter did not insist on Somoza's removal, he did work toward tying United States support to progress on human rights. While Somoza was encouraged by Carter's limited praise, his opposition sensed that Carter's stated concerns signaled a possible end of United States support. Through a series of violent clashes the opposition showed the weakness of Somoza's position and the resulting eighteen-month War of Liberation ended Somoza's rule at the cost of 50,000 Nicaraguan lives.<sup>4</sup>

Although it was clear that the population of Nicaragua supported the overthrow of Somoza, the United States found it difficult to accept.<sup>5</sup> Somoza had been a brutal and

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Walker, *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Walker, 3. Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 51-111.

<sup>5</sup> Rep David Bonior and other Democrats in Congress saw the FSLN as a popular uprising rather than a communist takeover. This in concert with poignant memories of Vietnam, and the firm conviction that the United States had exerted imperialistic control over Latin America for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century convinced many that the most moral course of action was to let the Nicaraguans decide what form of government worked best for them. The government certainly had elements of communism, and in Bonior's words

ineffective leader, but certainly opposed communism. Cuba's Communism was a constant source of embarrassment and worry to politicians in Washington, and the thought of another communist regime in the Western Hemisphere could simply not be tolerated. This presented a difficult challenge for President Carter. His administration had no desire to get involved in another Vietnam-style intervention, but feared the strategic and political consequences of permanently losing Nicaragua to communism. Feebly the Carter administration attempted to persuade the Sandinistas to take a democratic and pro-Western course by offering friendly relations and economic aid. Carter's administration believed by embracing the revolution, instead of opposing it, they would avoid the same mistakes as the United States had made with Cuba. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance convinced Carter that, if the United States wanted to exert influence over Nicaragua, it needed to convince the Sandinistas that they were not enemies. The Carter Administration assumed that the Sandinistas were not already embarked on a radical course. It believed that actions to the contrary would needlessly push the Sandinistas into the arms of Cuba and the Soviets.<sup>6</sup>

However, the Sandinistas quickly made it clear that they intended to chart a Marxist course. This direction baffled and exasperated the Carter administration. Sandinistas had key moderate influences removed, and allowed advisors from Cuba to provide important direction. Worse yet, the Defense Department, the CIA, and Secretary Vance openly worried about the possibility of Nicaragua influencing other leftist groups

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"weren't angels," but they did have popular support. Author's Interview with Rep Bonior, November 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Kagan, 123-125.

in the region.<sup>7</sup> Despite these worries the Carter administration persuasively made the case that economic aid would alleviate many of the causes of people in Central America turning to communism. Although the Sandinistas allowed the aid to come into Nicaragua, the majority of which went directly to the private sector, they gradually decided that foreign economic aid ran contrary to the goals of the revolution. Furthermore the Sandinistas believed that they would be effectively supported by Cuba and the USSR if they broke away from the United States. Perhaps the most shocking display of solidarity with the USSR early on was their vote to abstain from a resolution condemning the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. It became clear to the Carter administration that despite its demonstrations of good will Sandinistas found more common ground with the Soviets and had chosen a Marxist-Leninist path.<sup>8</sup>

Carter's human rights ideology and attention to recent precedents limited his possible response. His predecessors, Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford had counted on a policy of détente to keep the cold war from escalating to dangerous levels. Carter continued along this line. Politically, these presidents believed that the post-Vietnam American public would not likely tolerate direct military conflict.<sup>9</sup> However,

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<sup>7</sup> *Time*, "The Victors Organize," August 13, 1979. Kagan, 128.

<sup>8</sup> Kagan, 126-133. Kagan used Carter Administration documents to prove that the Sandinistas chose the communist path because of ideological compatibility, and because they believed that the United States was in decline and the Soviets were on the rise. In *Regan versus the Sandinistas* Thomas Walker proposed that the Sandinistas were more pragmatic than ideological, and that hostility from the Reagan Administration forced the Sandinistas to rely on their relationship with the USSR. Kagan has the most current data, and makes a more convincing case.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 248.

Carter's policy, one that tried to balance human rights,<sup>10</sup> popular sovereignty, as well as broader cold war concerns was unable to steer the Sandinistas away from communism. Carter's foreign policy advisors pointed out that the Sandinistas had some measure of popular support,<sup>11</sup> and it was difficult to see how a communist government in Nicaragua constituted a threat to national security. For Carter, containing communism at the expense of popular sovereignty in the Third World after Vietnam appeared both immoral and unachievable. However Carter was defeated by Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election and with Reagan came a new assertiveness to American foreign policy.

Where Carter saw insurmountable moral and logistical obstacles, Reagan saw opportunities to counter Soviet expansion. Through strength and persistence he promised to turn the tide of United States decline. Carter himself had concluded that the 1970s had been characterized by a loss of confidence in its economic, moral, and military power. Examples were everywhere. The collapse of South Vietnam, fuel shortages, hostages in Iran, even the presidency had lost prestige in the wake of the Watergate scandal. In addition, the USSR invaded Afghanistan, Nicaragua fell to the Sandinistas, and it appeared as if the pro- United States regime in El Salvador would also fall.<sup>12</sup> Rather than let this string of defeats stand Republicans, led by Ronald Reagan, proposed that the United States take a more aggressive stance. The Republican Party, as stated in their 1980

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 10. Carter threatened to cut off aid to regimes that violated human rights early on in his administration. He desired to support progressive democratic forces rather than regimes whose only virtue was being anti-communist.

<sup>11</sup> This particular point has been debated endlessly by politicians and scholars alike. Certainly the anti-Somoza coalition had popular support in 1979.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 20-21.

platform, opposed assistance to any Marxist government in the Western Hemisphere, and specifically opposed the Carter administration's aid program for the Sandinistas. The bottom line for the Reagan administration was stopping, or reversing, the Soviet Union's growing influence in critical spots around the globe. The Marxist revolution in Nicaragua was a great opportunity to test this new approach.<sup>13</sup> So as to illustrate this new reality, Reagan's 1<sup>st</sup> Secretary of State, General Alexander M. Haig, stated early on that the United States would be willing to use force to advance its ends.<sup>14</sup>

While Reagan had communicated clear principles regarding opposing global communism, the details had yet to be worked out. Assessing diplomatic relations with Nicaragua started soon after Reagan's inauguration. His administration sought to draw the line quickly against the advance of communism. Cuba, with Soviet financial support, was believed to be the agitating force behind the Sandinistas.<sup>15</sup> Reagan decided that the situation in Central America was not only a matter of national security, but that the situation required immediate action. The Sandinistas were still consolidating power in

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<sup>13</sup> David Ryan, *US-Sandinista Diplomatic Relations*, (New York: St. Martins, 1995), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Robert D. Schulzinger, *American Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 343. Schulzinger proposes that this willingness to elevate Cold War concerns over issues of popular sovereignty eventually became a pattern. The Reagan administration helped keep the revolutionaries from power in El Salvador, overthrew the Marxists on Grenada, and tried to overthrow the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

<sup>15</sup> Turner, Robert F. *Nicaragua v. United States: A Look at the Facts*. (Washington: Pergamon, 1987) This work put out by an "independent nonpartisan research organization," details the connection between Cuba and the Sandinistas, as well as the political credentials of leaders such as Daniel Ortega. David Ryan in *US-Sandinista Foreign Relations* also notes this connection between the Soviets-Cuba and Nicaragua. Christopher Dickey, *With the Contras*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), described Castro visiting Nicaragua in July 1980 to speak proudly at celebrations of the revolution. He was treated as a celebrity and "mythical father" to the leaders of the Sandinistas. 70-73.

Nicaragua, and the socialist El Salvadoran rebels (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front or FMLN) had recently launched a major offensive in El Salvador. Reagan was not only concerned with the reality of Communism in Central America, but also the worldwide perception that the United States was weak. After all if the United States could not defeat its enemies in its own back yard it could not likely defeat them anywhere.<sup>16</sup>

The Carter administration had tied United States economic aid to the issue of whether or not Nicaragua was aiding El Salvadoran leftist Guerillas. Two weeks before the United States Presidential election, described by commentators as too close to call, the Sandinistas decided to resume shipments of arms to their ideological cousins in El Salvador. When the CIA discovered the evidence on 2 January 1981 President Carter decided to suspend economic aid to the Sandinistas and later decided to resume military support to the government of El Salvador. This set a precedent for the incoming Reagan administration to follow. Ten years later Sandinista leader Humberto Ortega regretted this error noting that, “We paid a heavy price for our internationalist romanticism.”<sup>17</sup>

Six months after the Sandinista takeover<sup>18</sup>, President Carter authorized the CIA to provide money and backing to the opposition. Carter hoped to keep *La Prensa* alive and bolster the democratic alternative to the Sandinistas. All of this was done in secret, but the political opposition in Nicaragua clearly understood that the United States was on

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, 164.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 151. Beginning of 1980.

their side. Carter had also discovered that five hundred Cubans<sup>19</sup> were entrenched in the Nicaraguan military, intelligence service and key communication facilities. When CIA director William Casey discovered these facts, it confirmed his suspicions. When he was made aware of documents by the Sandinistas declaring that they would actively assist other communist national liberation movements, the stage was set for confrontation.<sup>20</sup>

Secretary of State Haig believed that the United States must show determined resolve. He believed the US had made missteps in Korea and Vietnam and had no wish to repeat these tentative mistakes. He advocated blockading Cuba, the source of the Sandinista's weapons. Casey preferred a less confrontational option. He proposed a top secret finding<sup>21</sup> to support moderates in El Salvador. This finding, which Reagan approved in December 1981, authorized financial backing for covert programs in Central America.<sup>22</sup> This covert approach was part of a larger policy of actively opposing communist forces in Central America. This policy included suspending aid to Nicaragua, promoting a \$113 million aid package to the Salvadoran Government, and plans to

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<sup>19</sup> Woodward, Bob, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 121. Ambassador Pezzullo believed that the Cubans were well-entrenched, but not taken very seriously by Nicaraguan leadership.

<sup>20</sup> Woodward, *Veil*, 113-114. "The 72 Hour Document," as it became known was filled with communist terminology, and persuaded William Casey that the Sandinistas had the means, philosophy, and faith to spread their revolution across Central America.

<sup>21</sup> The President is required to "find" compelling national security reasons as a basis for a covert action undertaken by the CIA. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 288.

<sup>22</sup> Woodward, *Veil*, 119-120.

resume military training of Cuban or Nicaraguan exiles to battle the Sandinista and Cuban forces.<sup>23</sup>

The Reagan administration's plans to roll back communists in Central America were met with immediate and substantial resistance from Congress, the media, and the public. Majority Leader Wright gave only tentative initial support, hoping to keep a bipartisan front in foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> However, the memory of Vietnam lingered. House Appropriations Subcommittee's chairman, Clarence Long, suggested that the United States in Central America was similar to the initial stages in Vietnam. The press also questioned Reagan from the outset. Walter Cronkite asked Reagan directly about the connections between El Salvador and a Vietnam-type situation. Reagan diffused the tense situations with either humor or references to a continuation of Carter's strategy. However, poll numbers suggested that Reagan's Central America rhetoric might derail his domestic agenda. Advisors who saw domestic issues as priorities urged the president to avoid serious ideological clashes on foreign policy with liberal opponents. This forced a change in strategy rather than a fundamental change of direction. Instead of bold pronouncements they promoted public diplomacy, participated in peace negotiations, and made certain congressional accommodations.<sup>25</sup>

Part of the resistance from Congress was due to divisions among foreign policy experts and career diplomats. Part of this resistance came from those who would oppose another "Vietnam" at all costs. Others opposed the Reagan administration's policy out of

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 24-25.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, *Worth it All*, 48.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 26-27.

frustration at their apparent exaggerations, distortions, or misrepresentations.<sup>26</sup> Congress resented Secretary Haig's threats to use "emergency funds" or go over the heads of Congress if they refused to fund military aid to El Salvador. In Congress, liberal Democrats were reluctant to oppose Reagan's tax cuts, but did not flinch when confronted with a serious change of policy toward Central America.

Noting the strength of the opposition, Reagan charted a tentative course. Reagan's first major decision toward Nicaragua was the decision to permanently halt funding to the Sandinistas in April of 1981. The Sandinistas responded with complaints, but kept on the course of supplying arms to their ideological brethren in El Salvador, consolidating power, and silencing opponents by various means.<sup>27</sup> The Reagan administration, desiring to oppose the Sandinistas, could not work within the political process since the Sandinistas had effectively silenced political opposition. Since they had suspended foreign aid, they could not use the aid as leverage, and therefore only had arming opponents to the Sandinistas as an option. However, Reagan's administration believed that arming the opposition had little chance of success. Using the support of conservative

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<sup>26</sup> Wright, *Worth it All*, 50. Ryan also notes the Congressional distaste for Haig's rhetoric, *U.S.-Sandinista Diplomatic Relations*, 14-15.

<sup>27</sup> Kagan details the Sandinista pattern of behavior before and after Reagan's decision to suspend aid, *A Twilight Struggle*, 181-183. Ryan argues that the Sandinistas could not control the porous Nicaraguan border and that there was actually very little arms moving between the Sandinistas and the Salvadoran guerillas. *US-Sandinista Diplomatic Relations*, 16-17. However, Kagan, through interviews with United States officials and ex-Salvadoran guerrillas confirm that the Nicaraguans were actively supplying arms to El Salvador.

Senator Jesse Helms as political cover, the Reagan administration chose to engage in diplomacy to persuade the Sandinistas to quit their support of El Salvadoran rebels.<sup>28</sup>

Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders traveled to meet with the Sandinistas to propose that a stop in shipments to the El Salvadoran rebels would result in renewed food and developmental aid, as well as improved relations between the United States and Nicaragua. The Sandinistas found the arrogance of Ender's proposal maddening. They rejected any deal that included deserting their ideological brethren in El Salvador. Enders' ensuing threats of being smashed by the United States military or ruined through economic strangulation also fell upon deaf ears. The Sandinistas believed the Soviets were stronger and on the ascent. They also believed that the debate in U.S. Congress that flooded the halls after Haig's strong statements on Central America proved that the Reagan administration could do little besides issuing strong statements. Essentially the Sandinistas believed that the United States was old, of failing health, and unable to stand in their way. The Sandinistas were further bolstered by socialists in Germany, Spain, and France who issued statements supporting the Sandinistas. Oil-rich Mexico and Venezuela also voiced their opposition to potential American aggression. This vocal support encouraged Sandinistas to ignore United States concerns. They insulted Democratic congressmen who tried to find middle ground, and oppressed internal opposition in Nicaragua to the point that the *Washington Post* pointed out that Nicaragua was sliding

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<sup>28</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*. 187-189.

toward becoming a Communist-controlled police state. The Reagan administration rebuffed in their efforts at diplomacy, decided instead to pursue a more aggressive path.<sup>29</sup>

On November 1, 1981 CIA Director William Casey met with the Argentine military's chief of staff, General Leopoldo Galtieri. They agreed that the Argentines should continue training the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) and that the United States would supply money and equipment. By December Reagan had approved the overall strategy of low-intensity conflict that would harass the Sandinistas rather than overthrow them. They hoped that covert action would pressure them to stop supporting the rebels in El Salvador. The covert action also had value in that it required no public explanation, defense or public vote by Congress. However, under new procedure guidelines for consulting with Congress, Casey still had to explain his actions before intelligence committees in both houses of Congress. The House Intelligence Committee did not completely understand the new covert actions, but did not fully resist the action. The chair of the committee, Edward Boland, did however request regular briefings on how the operations were proceeding.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*. 190-199. Arturo Cruz, Nicaraguan ambassador to the United States resigned his post on November 14, 1981 to protest both Sandinista crackdowns on private-sector leaders and Reagan's aggressive policy. Cruz believed United States refusal to continue rapprochement negotiations with the Sandinistas would simply move Nicaragua closer to Soviet bloc countries. Wright, *Worth it All*, 49-50. Kagan argues convincingly, however, that this closeness with the Soviets was ideological, and strategic for the Sandinistas. The scholarly debate closely follows the debate that took place in Congress at the time. Those who favored (or approved) Reagan's aggressive policy believed that the USSR was a significant threat to the United States. Those who opposed (or disapproved) of Reagan's policies believed that the United States belligerent stance pushed countries into the Soviet camp.

<sup>30</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 201-207.

Nicaragua's covert struggle quickly became part of Reagan's overall foreign policy doctrine. He proposed that America support democratic change everywhere in the world. Whether it was Poland, Angola, Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, or Nicaragua Reagan declared it the obligation of the United States to support democratic change. This even meant in countries ruled by allied dictators. Therefore, Reagan shifted attention from Nicaragua supplying arms to Nicaragua and focused his rhetoric on human rights abuses. This shift momentarily won moderate Democrat's support in Congress, and encouraged those in the CIA to plan a full-scale assault on Sandinista rule. However, Reagan's plan to begin an armed attack in Nicaragua immediately drew fire from liberal Democrats. After February and March revelations that covert action in Nicaragua was proceeding, Democrats David Bonior and Michael Barnes, objected to the United States trying to overthrow a legitimate government. While many Democrats were willing to support the United States efforts to block shipments of arms to El Salvador, they were unwilling to actively work to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.<sup>31</sup>

Congressman Barnes threatened to introduce legislation banning all covert actions against Nicaragua, but was convinced by Speaker Tip O'Neill that the matter could be better handled by Boland inside the House Intelligence Committee. Boland's committee worked toward a compromise that pacified opposition to covert funding, but did not overstep the traditional role of the intelligence committee in oversight of foreign affairs. In the classified annex to the report accompanying the 1983 intelligence authorization bill

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<sup>31</sup> Nino M. Serafino, *Contra Aid and the Reagan Doctrine*, Congressional Research Service Review, March 1987. Vol 8, Number 3, p6, and Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 209-218.

the House Intelligence Committee inserted language that limited the uses of covert funding. Boland added a phrase to the annex that stated that the will of Congress was that “none of the funds appropriated could be spent for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua or provoking an exchange between Nicaragua and Honduras.”<sup>32</sup> This compromise, which denied the reality already in place on the ground in Nicaragua, was simply an effort to allow the committee to be anti-communist and pro-sovereignty at the same time. The language “for the purpose” gave the Reagan administration the freedom to support the Contras (anti-Sandinista fighters) in any way they chose as long as their intention was not to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. The Contras were clearly not ideologues, hoping simply to contain a communist government inside Nicaragua. Any thought otherwise was delusional. However, Boland designed the compromise in order to attempt to shape foreign policy while recognizing the possible political avenues in a sharply divided Congress.

Understanding the Contras is both essential and complex. The makeup of the Contra forces was diverse. Initially the Argentines picked the Contra leadership from ex-National Guard officers with tentative American support. The Contra foot soldiers were a mix of northern Nicaraguan marauders and ex-national guardsmen. They were poorly organized, and more or less responsive to their officers. Others were those who had defected from the Sandinistas as their leaders were crowded out of power. Still others were protestant evangelicals.<sup>33</sup> Certainly the largest group that made up the anti-

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<sup>32</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 218.

<sup>33</sup> The protestant evangelicals resented Sandinista pressures against their churches, believing they were communistic and atheistic. Many of them lived in the countryside

Sandinistas was the force of Miskito, Sumo, and Rama Indians and black “Creoles” on the Atlantic coast. They responded to the arrest of leaders or armed repression by a general uprising that the Sandinistas feared would turn into a secessionist movement. The Sandinistas launched a major offensive in late 1981 intending to prevent the region from slipping away.<sup>34</sup> The thousands relocated by the Sandinistas kept a permanent grudge, thousands more fled to Honduras. Despite the various groups who were opposed to Sandinista rule, the Contras’ main military force was made up by no more than a few hundred. As things stood in 1981, against the regular Sandinista army of 25,000, they did not have a prayer.

In early 1982 the Contras primarily trained and stockpiled supplies. The CIA picked two key bridges in Northern Nicaragua to stage the first attack. One of the bridges was part of the route to supply Salvadoran guerrillas. As the CIA hoped, the attack forced the Sandinistas to take harsh undemocratic actions. The press was restricted, political opponents were intimidated, and a new tax was levied to support measures designed to thwart any invasion. Edén Pastora announced from Costa Rica that he would take up arms against the Sandinistas. As his revolutionary credentials were unimpeachable, his denunciation of the revolution seriously damaged the Sandinistas’ reputation in Latin America. He traveled to Venezuela, Mexico, and Washington D.C. to try to convince liberals to reject the Sandinistas’ radicalism. International support also declined as the

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which because of unpopular price controls and rationing was largely anti-Sandinista. Some evangelicals were believed by the Sandinistas to be linked to the CIA and persecuted in early 1982. Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 228-229.

<sup>34</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 221-224.

leaders of Costa Rica and Venezuela called on the Sandinistas to embrace pluralism and freedom.<sup>35</sup>

All of the defections and distaste for Sandinista crackdowns did not change the essential foundations of resistance to Reagan's policy. Liberal Democrats and foreign leaders, despite the nature of the Sandinista regime, did not want the United States to interfere with a sovereign country's internal politics. Secretary of State George Shultz proposed that the situation in Central America was critical. Growing Soviet influence in Central America could distract the United States from confronting them in other quarters of the globe. The Sandinista revolution had started well, but was quickly taken over by hard-line communists. To Shultz, the Contras, originally members of the Somoza National Guard, became a "magnet attracting the democratic forces that hoped to reclaim the anti-Somoza revolution from the Sandinistas." However, in order to oppose the Sandinistas the Reagan administration would have to successfully overcome objections to their policy loudly vocalized by liberal Democrats supported by even more vocal NGOs.

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<sup>35</sup> Eden Pastora, nicknamed "Comandante Zero," was a hero of the revolution that overthrew Somaza. He accused the Sandinistas on April 15, 1982 of betraying the true Sandinista movement. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 286-287. Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 225-230.

## CHAPTER 3

### NGOS' MOTIVATION TO OPPOSE PRESIDENT REAGAN

The same era of political instability, corruption, and revolution that led the United States government to intervene in hot spots around the globe made NGOs anxious for some sort of international order. These NGOs saw the world not as a Cold War contest between two opposing forces, but rather a world full of individuals who were very much like themselves. They cared little for domino theories, or spheres of influence: rather they wanted the United States to use its power to support human rights around the globe.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the officials in Washington D.C. these groups of citizens saw the United States government, particularly the armed forces, often as the problem rather than the solution.

President Reagan unintentionally helped this vocal and grassroots (centered) opposition flourish. Rather than engage in incremental subtle changes in foreign policy he made Central American foreign policy a central part of his administration. Reagan's regular attention paid to Central America ironically accomplished the difficult task of raising awareness for the NGOs. Instead of having to spend valuable money and time doing advertisements or stunts in order to grab the public's attention, all that the NGOs

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<sup>1</sup> Ed Griffin-Nolan , *Witness for Peace*, 190-191. Two hundred national religious leaders signed a statement calling for an end to Contra aid in 1987. They insisted that Nicaragua was not the enemy and that the Contras were bringing a small nation to the edge of ruin by means of open war and terrorism. This attitude was common among those belonging to NGOs. Their convictions came less from anti-American fervor and more from contact with them on a one on one level. While policy makers and political leaders looked at political aspects, members of NGOs were more concerned that civilians that they knew personally were being killed by weapons supplied by their tax dollars.

had to do was to present their own spin on Reagan's policies.<sup>2</sup> This chapter will focus on the background and early efforts of several key NGOs that opposed Reagan's Central American policy in the 1980s.

In the 1970s, reports of widespread human rights abuses in Central America convinced the leadership of the National Council of Churches<sup>3</sup> in New York that it was time for action. These groups were particularly outraged by the armed coups in Chile and Uruguay. Facing reports of violence stemming from a United States backed coup in Chile, they purposed to do something. Together with like-minded organizations they banded together to form the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA).<sup>4</sup> The organization began with tentative steps and a limited budget. WOLA hoped to mobilize outrage created by reported human rights abuses in Latin America and channel it in a positive way. WOLA desired to become an information gathering agency that found practical avenues to present reliable information to both Congress and the State Department.

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*. p. 60, 83. The Sanctuary movement fielded over 70,000 activists. Witness for peace fielded over 40,000. The Pledge of Resistance with its base of over 80,000 activists spent 5 years mobilizing resistance in order to influence eight different Contra aid votes and sway public opinion during five major public awareness campaigns.

<sup>3</sup> Politically active since their beginning in 1950, the NCC actively supported humanitarian causes in the 1970s.

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Bouvier. *The Washington Office on Latin America: Charting a New Path in U.S. – Latin American Relations*. (Washington D.C., WOLA, 1991) p 1-2.

WOLA initially sought funding by protestant U.S. churches.<sup>5</sup> In a post-Vietnam and Watergate environment they found churches receptive to the message that the United States government's explanations for actions abroad needed to be greeted with skepticism. The post-Watergate shakeup in Congress also played a part as it redistributed power and allowed NGOs like WOLA greater access to policy makers. These elected officials were much more likely to investigate the president, the armed forces, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).<sup>6</sup> Many of WOLA's initial contacts with Freshman Congressmen, such as Tom Harkin (D-IA), George Miller (D-CA), Paul Simon (D-IL), and Christopher Dodd (D-CT), paid off in the long run as they grew influential in Congress.

WOLA's work centered primarily with human rights issues. Together with Representative Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) they worked to oppose loans to abusive governments. They also worked to put strict human rights conditions on U.S. military and economic aid. They pressured Congress by calling for

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<sup>5</sup> The first year they were funded by the United Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church, Church World Service, and the Disciples of Christ, The American Baptists, the United Church of Christ, Lutheran Church of America (NY), the Episcopal Church, Church of the Brethren, and the Mennonite Central Committee. Catholic organizations like Maryknoll, the Capuchins, the United States Catholic Conference, the Jesuit Missions, and other religious orders supported WOLA soon after. Bouvier, *The Washington Office on Latin America*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Members of WOLA noted that Seymour Hersh's reports about U.S. intelligence abuses vividly illustrated the matter to members of Congress. The resulting Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities eventually led to institutionalized oversight over intelligence gathering. These committees which looked at domestic abuses also opened the door for evaluation of the CIA's activities overseas. Bouvier, *The Washington Office on Latin America*, 3-4. Leroy Ashby also concluded that Watergate emboldened legislators and led to a "congressional reassertion of authority." *Fighting the Odds: The Life of Senator Frank Church*, p 416.

hearings, testifying and documenting abuses in Latin American countries where United States was providing assistance. They also called for reconsideration of assistance to countries who had improved their human rights record.<sup>7</sup>

Early successes of WOLA included generating public support for continued funding for negotiations aimed at relinquishing U.S. rights in the Panama Canal Zone. Through use of targeted publications and grass roots organization they were able to help narrowly pass the funding, which enabled the State Department and Panamanian Foreign Ministry to forge the Panama Canal Treaties. They were also the first group to publish a report picked up by the major media concerning human rights violations of the U.S.-funded Contra forces in Nicaragua.<sup>8</sup>

WOLA's means of accomplishing goals were primarily educational. Annually, WOLA published dozens of reports, and organized hundreds of meetings, seminars, and conferences for the general public and for members of Congress on human rights related issues. In addition WOLA staff either published articles in major newspapers themselves, or worked closely with journalists and editors to suggest story ideas and aid in interpreting events and movements in Latin America and Washington. WOLA also organized delegations to travel to trouble spots in Latin America. In the 1970s key House Representatives visited Chile and Bolivia. These trips either led to introduction of key legislation, or helped increase public awareness of human rights abuses. WOLA also sent teams to monitor elections in the region, paying careful attention to the political, social

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<sup>7</sup> Bouvier, *The Washington Office on Latin America*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Bouvier, 5-6.

and human rights conditions that surround the local election.<sup>9</sup> Specifically in relation to Nicaragua in 1989, WOLA became active in briefing delegations, producing comprehensive background materials, and organizing events in Washington for returning delegations to present their findings. WOLA also published *Nicaragua Election Monitor* which was used by media that covered the elections of 1989. In addition the WOLA staff stayed in constant contact with press, government officials, congressional staffers and human rights workers in the United States and Latin America. They worked toward building coalitions, catalyzing actions, and providing leadership on issues relating to human rights and United States policies in Latin America.<sup>10</sup> One of these coalitions that WOLA worked closely was the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy. Out of this coalition came the Central America Working Group (CAWG) that brought together some 50 churches and affiliates. The CAWG became a key opposition to the Reagan administration's Central America policy.<sup>11</sup>

Another NGO which eventually opposed Reagan's foreign policy in the 1980s was the longstanding Sister Cities program. After noting the past tensions between the United States and Latin America<sup>12</sup> the Eisenhower administration looked at new ways to improve relations between Latin America and the United States. These "people to people" programs strove to unite people around the common pursuit of peace by

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<sup>9</sup> Bouvier, 6-7. Rep Bonior went on several of these trips and found them particularly helpful in understanding foreign policy issues. *Interview with the author* November 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Bouvier, 7.

<sup>11</sup> The Church of the Brethren began to support the CAWG in 1988 as an autonomous entity. Bouvier, 7.

<sup>12</sup> This came out of the White House conference on citizen diplomacy of 1956.

emphasizing common interests and promoting understanding through shared efforts. Exchanges took place in arts, education, athletics, law, medicine, and business. These exchanges introduced people from distant regions and cultures and promoted understanding on a one-on-one basis. Part of this “people-to-people” program was a sister city concept that insisted that understanding between people would help build a foundation for world peace.<sup>13</sup> This concept, introduced by the Eisenhower administration, moved forward in the form of a private foundation formed in 1967. By June of 1987 this foundation, Sister Cities International, recognized 1,287 sister city arrangements between 786 American and 1,153 foreign cities. These arrangements were spread across all 50 states and involved 86 foreign countries. This work was praised by politicians of both major U.S. parties and encouraged on both the local and national level. President Kennedy supported the program and noted that it had the power to change private citizens’ attitudes. He hoped that, “through personal relations our curiosity can be fulfilled by a sense of knowledge, cynicism can give way to trust, and the warmth of human friendship can be kindled.”<sup>14</sup> If the old political maxim, “all politics is local,” is true it helps to explain the effectiveness of the Sister Cities program. Sister Cities, and programs like it, effectively make foreign policy local. Instead of United States citizens seeing issues through a “Cold War” lens, those who have visited a sister city or hosted a delegation from a sister city see foreign policy as much more personal. If people have

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<sup>13</sup> Liz Chilsen, and Sheldon Rampton, *Friends In Deed: The Story of US-Nicaragua Sister Cities*, (Madison: Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua, 1988), 18-19.

<sup>14</sup> Chilsen, 19-20.

seen other's sufferings face to face, they are much less likely to be indifferent to their fate.

The early statements by leaders of the Sister Cities program closely mirrored official U.S. foreign policy. As they were unaccustomed to Central America they trusted the opinion of government officials and proclaimed that they supported official U.S. goals. In the 1970s Wisconsin Governor John W. Reynolds, whose state had a sister city relationship with Nicaragua, summarized Somoza's brutal dictatorship as a "bastion of Western democracy and freedom," and added that he knew of "no better way to directly demonstrate our support, and at the same time counter-attack hostile infiltrations, than by this type of people-to-people exchange."<sup>15</sup> However over time the Sister Cities volunteers began to witness events that overruled any implicit trust of their government. One key event that changed volunteers' impression of U.S. foreign policy was when Nicaragua suffered a devastating earthquake in 1972. Concerned citizens put together relief missions to Nicaragua by sending food and medical supplies. Their efforts were largely in vain as U.S. ally Somoza seized most of the supplies and sold them for a profit in his supermarkets.<sup>16</sup>

Frustration with official U.S. foreign policy apparently was common among volunteers in Central America. They often went to Central America for humanitarian reasons and came home prepared to work for change in official United States Foreign policy toward Central America. Illustrative of the pendulum swing of an individual

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<sup>15</sup> Chilsen, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Chilsen 20.

involved in the “people-to-people” programs, was Mirette Seireg, a nutritionist sponsored by the United States, who encountered the ironies of United States foreign policy in Nicaragua after the ascension of the Sandinistas. After a number of her students were killed by Contra attacks she began to sympathize with the Nicaraguans who were resisting the United States created Contras. Thus, the Sister Cities program, originally initiated by United States politicians began to oppose official U.S. policy because of information gleaned by person-to-person contacts. These efforts only intensified as the relations between the United States and Nicaragua worsened. As news began to leak out about United States support of Contras in Nicaragua citizens in Wisconsin who had been sending material aid to Nicaragua were disturbed that the people they were trying to help were targets of United States supported soldiers. In response, citizens in Wisconsin formed the Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua (WCCN) and began raising awareness concerning the issue of the Contras. Through a series of educational activities the WCCN reached out to groups all across the political spectrum. At the same time citizens in Boulder, Colorado passed an initiative calling for an end to military intervention in Central America, and Wisconsin held a United States Nicaragua Friendship Conference that brought together 150 participants from 24 states.<sup>17</sup>

These activities illustrate the paradox of diplomatic relations when considering both government and non government organizations. On 27 June 1986 Congress voted to send \$100 million in aid to the Nicaraguan Contras. At the same time citizens of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Connecticut were sending thousands of dollars worth of aid to

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<sup>17</sup> Chilsen, 20-22.

what amounted to be the other side of the conflict. The representatives in Washington were concerned with hemispheric security and the wider issues of the cold war. The citizens involved in “people-to-people” contact were concerned with making sure that the people that they had met on trips to Central America had their basic needs attended to. The result of this was two separate foreign policies. There was the official foreign policy of the United States, and the foreign policies of individual U.S. cities. Frustrated citizens in New Haven, Connecticut did not believe that protests and letter writing would change United States’ foreign policy, so they initiated their own policy. They sent a delegation that carried more than \$3000 in medical supplies to hospitals in Leon and included an invitation to the mayor. Increasing the irony of the situation, the city of New Haven sent a group of 15 observers to monitor Nicaragua’s elections in 1984. They joined observers from Ghana, Sweden, and England. Their observations, that the elections were legitimate, stood in direct Contrast with the official U.S. position that the elections had been a sham.<sup>18</sup> Ironically the only systematic attempt to undermine the Nicaraguan elections was done by U.S. diplomats who attempted to persuade key candidates to drop out of the race, or bribe lower level officials to abandon their campaign.<sup>19</sup> The United States, operating under the Cold War paradigm, simply assumed that no one would voluntarily choose a communist government.

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<sup>18</sup> Chilson, 24-27. Prominent international observers also concluded that the elections were predominantly free and fair. The Latin American Studies Association (LASA) found that by the standards in Latin America, the election was a model of probity and fairness.

<sup>19</sup> David Ryan, *US-Sandinista Diplomatic Relations: Voice of Intolerance*, London: Macmillan, 90-91.

Forging an alternate foreign policy gave the participants in the Sister City program a feeling of accomplishment and encouraged the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. Connecticut resident Alan Wright summarized the philosophy of those involved in this alternative foreign policy; “So long as the government remains our intermediary with Nicaragua we will be perpetually tied to their will, voicing opposition to their policies but unable to develop a positive, constructive alternative.” Wright believed that political rallies accomplished nothing. People in Nicaragua did not profit from them and all that rallies did was to exhaust people involved in them with no tangible results achieved. In Contrast the Sister Cities program donated medicine and equipment to hospitals, provided assistance to a Nicaraguan University, subsidized an orphanage for girls, and provided health and safety equipment for Leon’s sewer workers.<sup>20</sup> Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega took note of the irony of the situation and noted:

The true values of the American people cannot be denied by unjust policies carried out by the government. Their values stand for peace and against war. By nature, man cannot see in another man an enemy. He has to see another man, a friend, a brother. Peoples, by nature, cannot be enemies, even though there be policies that try to have countries confronting one another.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the most daring and resourceful of the NGOs that tried to limit armed conflict in Nicaragua was Witness for Peace. Certainly they asked the most of their recruits. They bluntly asked their volunteers to pay their own travel and living expenses in order to put themselves in a war zone. Through experience in Nicaragua the organizers

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<sup>20</sup> Chilson, 27-29.

<sup>21</sup> Chilson, 31.

hoped that if Contras knew that if United States' citizens were visiting a Nicaraguan town they would call off attacks.

Witness for Peace started their loosely organized efforts in 1983. A group of Christians representing ten religious denominations, concerned with general state of Nicaragua had flown to Managua in 1983 on a fact-finding tour. Soon after arriving, they heard that the border town of El Porvenir had been under attack the previous day, and decided to see for themselves. As odd as the sight must have been for the Nicaraguans, a group of white Americans pulled up to their small border town in an old bus and began to inspect the rubble. They asked two of the youngsters standing around holding rifles about the attack. The youngsters pointed to a hut across the border, through binoculars one of the visitors could see khaki-clad Contras strolling about. He asked the youngster why they were not shooting. His answer was simple and without pretense, "Because you're here." The Contras knew that if they killed a U.S. civilian, they would create an international incident, and that was a risk they were not prepared to take.<sup>22</sup> However the protection of El Porvenir was short-lived. The observers had only a limited amount of time to spend and as darkness approached, their driver became edgy and anxious to leave. The visitors feared what would happen if they left, they had seen the mourners, the bloodstains, and the ruined houses. As they left, the visitors contemplated how they as private citizens could possibly stop the conflict. They resolved that if all it took to stop the fighting was to put Americans in the war zone, then they would do it.<sup>23</sup> Witness for

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<sup>22</sup> Ed Griffin-Nolan, *Witness for Peace: A Story of Resistance*, (Louisville: Westminster, 1991), 24-25.

<sup>23</sup> Griffin-Nolan, 27-28.

Peace went right to work. Within three months of their initial visit to Nicaragua Witness for Peace had recruited 153 volunteers and landed them in the border region. The group was primarily religious, middle-aged, middle class, and white. Nearly fifty were ministers, nuns, priests, or lay pastoral workers. The group had also joined forces with prominent church leaders in Nicaragua. Baptist leader Sixto Ulloa tirelessly worked on publicizing the campaign within Nicaragua, while other Nicaraguans helped with logistics, and spent time convincing villagers that these volunteers were not CIA operatives. They believed they helped prevent an attack on Jalapa through publicizing their presence. In addition, throughout the visit to the region they gathered enough information to “make them question every official U.S. Government statement of what was happening there.”<sup>24</sup>

Witness for Peace believed it was able to prevent several military attacks on specific Nicaraguan targets. This was not a new idea, but rather a continuation of the tradition of peace activists entering war zones in order to prevent conflict. This active pacifism for Witness for Peace drew on faith in God, belief in non-violence, and confidence that a new social order could be created.<sup>25</sup> Volunteers’ time in the war zone only intensified their activism back at home. Many reported their experience to

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<sup>24</sup> Griffin-Nolan, 29-40. After traveling to Nicaragua dozens of Witness for Peace volunteers told their churches what they had seen. A “peace brigade” was sent to Jalapa, Nicaragua on news that a military invasion was imminent. Through banners and radio spots this group made a visible presence in the region. They hoped that if word got out that they were there, it would prevent the Contra invasion. Whether the group prevented the invasion of the town is subject to debate. Either because of Nicaraguan buildup in the area, internal divisions among the Contras, or the presence of U.S. civilians in the war zone, the attack did not take place.

<sup>25</sup> Griffin-Nolan, *Witness for Peace*, 64-65.

congregations, news organizations, and anyone else who would listen. They also politely or bluntly informed their elected representatives that the support for the Contras had to end. The Witness for Peace activists made effective spokesman because of their “everyman” respectable credentials and often became local celebrities. They were decidedly different from the ragged 60s protestor and had the credibility of someone who had actually visited the war zone. Witness for Peace’s tactics demanded committed volunteers. The experiences on the ground also tended to reinforce volunteers’ commitment to the cause. Nicaraguan believers, whose lives were in danger, asked the Americans if there were any Christians left in America, and if so, why were they not stopping this evil. In addition to being committed, the activists were politically astute. Some persuaded their local news reporters to join them on their trip to Nicaragua.<sup>26</sup> The influx of tourists into a foreign policy hotspot was unique and powerful. Between 1979 and 1986, more than one hundred thousand U.S. citizens visited Nicaragua. Most of these travelers were mainstream Protestants and progressive Catholics who spread the word through informal networks about the situation and encouraged others to go. Witness for Peace was unique in that it intentionally took people to the front lines or areas that had recently been attacked, but it was merely part of a larger phenomenon.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Griffin-Nolan, *Witness for Peace*, 87-90. Newspaper reporters from Akron, Rapid City, and Burlington traveled with Witness for Peace activists in 1984.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 140-141, 158-159. One could also point to the over 2000 American missionaries in Central America in 1979. With all of those missionaries sending reports home this would also add a significant amount of information to the pool of knowledge available to Christian constituents.

However this local success did not necessarily translate into legislation. Witness for peace advocates found that Congress's attention was much harder to grab. While local newspapers were anxious to greet them on their return, Representatives and Senators were hard to see, and even staffers were reluctant to listen.<sup>28</sup> However the highly committed NGO members did not give up and go home.

The difficulties encountered in achieving their goals forced NGOs to go through periods of soul searching. In order to turn emotional reactions into long term results they needed to decide who they were and what they could realistically accomplish. In their existing structure they were more of a symbolic gesture than a potent political force. That realization was discouraging when they were trying to defeat major foreign policy initiatives of a popular president. Witness for Peace also debated the theological ramifications of letting the ends justify the means. They believed, like many Christians, that it was God who did the real work, and thus, one did their best to be faithful and left the results up to God. This frustrated many in Witness for peace who saw their struggle as a matter of life and death and were thus prepared to organize and acquire leverage to force tangible results.<sup>29</sup> After considerable debate and strategic planning they decided to add traditional pressure tactics to their nonviolent strategy. This meant actively supporting candidates who proposed change in United States' policy, opposing administration supporters, organizing petition drives, making door to door contacts,

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<sup>28</sup> Griffin-Nolan, *Witness for Peace*, 97.

<sup>29</sup> Griffin-Nolan, *Witness for Peace*, 95-97. A good example of this would be when a group of Ohioans went to Nicaragua. On their return they put together an event that included carrying palm branches and praying for peace. They then traveled to Capitol Hill to report what they experienced, but they were only able to talk to six Congressmen.

initiating public debate, holding rallies, organizing sit-ins at congressional offices, and staging other political stunts. They hoped that renewed energy plus deliberate strategy would yield long term results.

During the 1984 election season they tirelessly organized, held public hearings, and in November voted against Ronald Reagan for president. While they were comforted by the fact that Reagan's policy concerning the Contras remained unpopular, the fact that Reagan won in a political landslide crushed their hopes for a quick end to the conflict.

Reagan too had reason to be discouraged. The Contras' fight against the Sandinistas achieved little success for the first three years from a military standpoint. The United States did suffer from considerable foreign condemnation, however. The general perception in Latin America was that the United States had stood in the way of peace in the region. The World Court had condemned the mining of Nicaragua's harbors, and the Reagan administration's image was further tarnished by the revelation that the CIA had produced a manual for the Contras suggesting that local officials should be assassinated. However, the landslide victory over Walter Mondale paved the way for regrouping and a renewed push against the Sandinistas.<sup>30</sup>

The 1984 election discouraged but did not cast down the activists that made up the leadership of NGOs like Witness for Peace. They continued to expand their organization and learn from past failures. The movement as a whole also continued to grow. In 1985 there were more than 500 United States based groups dealing with Central

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<sup>30</sup> Kagan, insert book title here 341-2.

American issues. By 1987 the number had doubled.<sup>31</sup> Witness for Peace provided activists for many of these organizations as well as persuading many of these groups to focus on Nicaragua rather than El Salvador.

As the numbers of activists grew they sharpened their focus and honed their public relations skills. They realized that in order to reach middle class Christians they would need to frame their message to appeal to this powerful constituency. Instead of railing against “United States Imperialism,” they argued for respect for life and international law. Instead of demonizing the United States as a whole they focused on this particular egregious foreign policy mistake in Nicaragua. Rather than discussing the fundamental changes that the radicals believed necessary they promoted a simple position of friendship, peace, and justice toward Nicaragua.<sup>32</sup> They also focused on clear achievable foreign policy victories. In response to the Reagan administration’s renewed effort for Contra funding the NGOs created a public relations strategy to defeat the request for 14 million in Contra aid. They did not have the ability to make national news themselves, so they simply piggybacked on the stories that the Reagan administration

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<sup>31</sup> Griffin-Nolan, *Witness for Peace*, 94-5. The Central America Resource Center in Texas listed more than five hundred United States groups dealing with Central America in 1985 and over one thousand by 1987. Witness for Peace supplied activists for many of these organizations and encouraged many organizations to focus on Nicaragua rather than El Salvador.

<sup>32</sup> Griffin-Nolan, *Witness for Peace*, 100. Witness for Peace’s ultimate goal was to fundamentally change United States foreign policy. Like many in the Central America Peace Movement they believed that the United States had politically dominated and economically exploited the area for most of its history. They saw this goal as politically unreachable however and chose to work toward the immediate goal of stopping the Contras. Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 218.

was creating.<sup>33</sup> Instead of feeding reporters dry opinions through local activists they emphasized the fact that they were sending ordinary people to a war zone. Witness for Peace informed the press that husbands and wives were traveling in different delegations so that their kids would not be orphaned if the worst case scenario happened. Peace activists also downplayed their lack of expertise on foreign policy and instead emphasized their ordinary “everyman or everywoman” credentials. They purposely set up scenarios where they either believed President Ronald Reagan or their local Baptist pastor. Movement organizers also took time to build relationships with members of the press. They would persistently present their case, work to be friendly, be available at all hours, provide background information to the story, and be very careful to be accurate and forthright.<sup>34</sup> Taking into consideration that this fight was both a national struggle and a local struggle, the activists concentrated on local news. They believed that they could influence key Contra aid votes by targeting specific Congressmen or Congresswomen in their home district. Once the movement had established credibility by being acknowledged in the national press, they had instant credibility on the local level. As will be seen in a later chapter the NGOs knew this strategy of targeting specific officials was a potentially successful strategy, but they did not employ on a large scale until the Contra vote of 1988.

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<sup>33</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 258. In Chapter 9 of *Resisting Reagan* Smith describes how the Reagan administration successfully planned and execute public relations in regards to Central American philosophy. This convincing portrayal showed the inherent disadvantage that the Central American peace movement was up against in the media war over Contra aid.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 259-260.

While Reagan respected the opposition's commitment to human rights, his administration believed that they were blind to the real Cold War issues that underlay the Contra policy. Despite the lack of public support his administration systematically pushed Congress as far as they would go toward Contra aid. These steps were taken against the advice of Secretary Shultz and some other advisors. They considered the Contras a political and military loser, and thought that with the current level of congressional support it was best to cut their losses. Reagan, however, insisted on staying the course, being confident that the communists would show their true intentions and vindicate his policies.<sup>35</sup> The Sandinista political crackdown after the 1984 elections provided that vindication. Their suspension of rights, increased censorship, driving out of opposition leaders provided the administration with several credible supporters like former Nicaraguan presidential candidate Arturo Cruz, who after the crackdown began to call for the United States to resume aid to the Contras.<sup>36</sup> This opening, coupled with his administration's post-election confidence, provided President Reagan with an opportunity to outline the ideological lines of battle. The Reagan Doctrine, enunciated by both Reagan and Shultz, declared that communist nations were by their very nature illegitimate and worthy of United States opposition. Secretary of State Shultz took this a

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<sup>35</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 349-350. Shultz in *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State*, believed that the administration needed to wait until the Congress was ready to move. Knowing the Sandinistas previous behavior he anticipated them doing something radical enough to make Contra support a possibility again in Congress. 427-428.

<sup>36</sup> Congressional Quarterly, Jan 19, 1985, p 119. Cruz was particularly helpful persuading democrats like David Obey, Bill Richardson, and Michael Barnes, to take another look at Contra aid. Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 351.

step further and declared that the United States had a duty to support those working for democracy everywhere, including democratic reform in non-Communist, pro-Western countries.<sup>37</sup>

However, the debate that followed did not necessarily benefit the administration. There were legitimate questions regarding the Contras' democratic credentials. Like the Sandinistas the Contras did not discriminate between civilians who supported the Sandinistas and military personnel. Significant civilian casualties caused by the Contras that were reported in the news media or relayed by activists motivated church organizations who had been opposing the aid to El Salvador to shift their focus to Nicaragua.<sup>38</sup>

As Reagan pushed for more aid and the NGOs engaged in various tactics to persuade Congress to hold the line, the Sandinistas hoped to deal a critical blow to the Contras to make the whole argument irrelevant. They bought more Soviet and Cuban arms and enforced the universal conscription announced by Humberto Ortega in October 1983. The plan swelled the Sandinista army but also pushed resentful Nicaraguans into the Contra forces and turned whole regions against them. The Sandinistas retaliated by shelling villages that sheltered Contras and relocating 7,000 families to government-controlled farm co-operatives.<sup>39</sup> It is therefore easy to understand how the issue became difficult to navigate for even loyal Republican members of Congress who kept up with

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<sup>37</sup> Shultz, 525. Specifically Shultz pointed to resistance movements in Poland, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Angola, South Africa, South Korea, the Philippines, and Chile.

<sup>38</sup> Kagan, 356.

<sup>39</sup> Kagan, 361.

the issue. The aid votes in 1985 became a complicated matter. On one hand Congress realized that the Sandinistas were clearly in the Communist camp and willing to engage in questionable political or military tactics. On the other hand, the United States had also engaged in some flagrantly illegal and immoral acts to oppose them.<sup>40</sup> The NGOs played a pivotal role in keeping the public aware of these issues. While Reagan's popularity was undeniable during the most of his presidency, his handling of Central America was not. At no time during his presidency did a majority of Americans support Contra aid, or an invasion of Central America for any reason<sup>41</sup>. Memories of Vietnam were too fresh and even Reagan's rhetorical gifts could not clarify the linkage of Central American thugs to legitimate Cold War concerns. Democrats who had buckled to pressure on budget issues or social concerns found that they had significant public backing if they opposed aid to the Contras. Liberal Democrats like David Bonior pressed forward, believing that the

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<sup>40</sup> Woodward, *Veil*, 319-340. The frequent missteps of the Reagan Administration in its Latin American policies alienated loyal Republican Senators. While he had technically informed influential Senators like Barry Goldwater (Arizona) and Richard Lugar (Indiana) about the mining of Nicaraguan Harbors, they were not informed in such a way to be made truly aware of the gravity of the situation. When word leaked to the press and the action was condemned worldwide the Senate acted quickly to distance itself from the CIA's actions. The Senate passed a nonbinding resolution condemning the mining and proclaiming that United States money could not be used in any way direct or indirect for the purpose of mining Nicaraguan territorial waters. Woodward described the details of this miscommunication in his contemporary expose of the CIA. He describes several conversations and speeches that were eventually stricken from the record but nevertheless convey the level of betrayal that Republican Senators felt when they learned that the United States was responsible for the mining of key Nicaraguan Harbors. Senator Patrick Moynihan admitted that the committee was informed of the mining but it was a 27 word, ten second long, aside in a two-hour-and-eighteen-minute presentation. Merely one sentence in eighty-four pages of transcript.

<sup>41</sup> The highest polled support for an invasion of Nicaragua was 30% in 1986. Sobel, *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy*, 67.

Contra issue was winnable even if he was on the opposite side of one of the most popular presidents in U.S. history.

## CHAPTER 4

### LEARNING HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY OPPOSE REAGAN

The grassroots based opposition to the Reagan Doctrine had both strengths and weaknesses. The strengths were the authentic outrage and the nearly limitless amount of volunteers and protesters that the various NGOs could mobilize. The weaknesses of the grassroots based opposition were their inability to influence events in Nicaragua and their disorganized initial responses to the openings that the Iran-Contra scandal afforded. As will be seen by the various narratives in this chapter the leaders of the movement to end Contra aid gradually learned through trial and error how to successfully influence their elected Representatives. It was this long process of learning from successes and mistakes that led to the eventual defeat of Contra funding in February 1988.

The funding for the Contras began in late 1981, but the full explanation to the American people did not come until 1985. President Reagan put forward his rationale and linked it to broader United States foreign policy goals in the form of the Reagan Doctrine given in the 1985 State of the Union address. Reagan stated that “We must not break faith with those who are risking their lives—on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua—to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth.” The advocates of the Reagan Doctrine hoped that support of anti-Marxist guerrillas would be not only a moral stand, but also an effective way to combat Soviet influence in the Third World. These advocates also hoped that on the short term this support would force a costly “burden of empire” on the Soviets, and perhaps even force a change in government in some places. Reagan administration officials also spoke of

aiding the peace process in many of these hot spots through support of insurgence. Their stated goal, in Nicaragua for example, was to see further democratization within Nicaragua and put an end to alleged Nicaraguan interference in neighboring states.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently, President Reagan needed to explain his position in a State of the Union Address because of the passionate debate over Contra funding that started immediately after aid began in late 1981. Funding for the Contras had its genesis in the classified portions of FY82 intelligence funding legislation, a \$19 million program of covert military assistance to the anti-Sandinista guerrillas, which was to be managed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Another \$19 million in covert military aid was reportedly approved by Congress in 1982 for FY83. At the same time, however, Congress voted to restrict the purpose of funding with the Boland Amendment. This amendment stated that none of the aid could be used for the purpose of overthrowing the Sandinista government.<sup>2</sup> In light of the Iran-Contra scandal the Boland Amendment ended up becoming a key victory for the opponents of Contra aid, and it also illustrated the power of NGO's in shaping the opinion of key Congressional leaders.

In this case it was the Maryknoll nuns who had the ear of the most powerful man in Congress – Speaker Tip O’Neill. The Maryknoll nuns, missionaries who labored sacrificially in Latin America, sent letters to Tip O’Neill on a regular basis in order to keep him informed about the conditions in Latin America. O’Neill’s fondness for the group had its genesis in his solid relationship with his aunt, Sister Eunice Tolan, who had

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<sup>1</sup> Contra Aid and the Reagan Doctrine, Congressional Research Service Review, March 1987. Vol 8, Number 3. p.1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Nina M. Serafino, *Contra Aid: Debate in Congress*. CRS Review, March 1987. p. 6.

been a high-ranking member of the Maryknoll order. Dating back to at least 1968, O'Neill entered Maryknoll statements into the *Congressional Record* and introduced Nicaragua-based Sister Peaggy Healy to other Congressmen with confident assurances of their trustworthiness. So much did their information and moral appeals shape O'Neill's views that he became unmovable on the issue. Elliott Abrams, supervisor of Latin American affairs during the Reagan years, believed O'Neill's views ludicrous, but completely unshakable due to Maryknoll influence. Biographer John Farrell even proposed that the martyrdom of four female American missionaries (two Maryknoll missionaries among the four) in 1980 hardened O'Neill's opposition to right wing groups in Central America and helped spark his determined support for the Boland amendment in 1982.<sup>3</sup> Abrams' sentiments and Farrell's scholarship certainly point to the effectiveness of the Maryknoll information campaign, however no one quote says it better than William Casey's remark, "If Tip O'Neill didn't have Maryknoll nuns who wrote letters, we would have a Contra program."<sup>4</sup>

O'Neill and Reagan continued to battle over the issue of Contra funding. The House and Senate could not agree on the issue until 1983 when Congress appropriated \$24 million for the Contras for FY84. Even this amount was the result of conference committee compromises balancing the Senate's classified approval and the House's

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<sup>3</sup> John Farrell, *Tip O'Neill and the Democratic Century*, (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 2001), 612-614.

<sup>4</sup> Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the C.I.A. 1981-1987*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 402.

public vote to end Contra aid. The bill approving the \$24 million for the Nicaraguan rebels also stipulated that no further discretionary covert funds could be used.<sup>5</sup>

Events in early 1984 put the already limited Contra aid in serious jeopardy. Casey was in the process of asking the appropriations committee for more money for the Contras when ships in Nicaraguan harbors began hitting mines. It was quickly discovered that the CIA was involved in this operation. Congress was predictably outraged. Only six months from an election, and anxious to distance themselves from this human rights violation, the House overwhelmingly defeated the aid by 241-177.

Reelected President Reagan again pushed for Contra aid, and once again NGOs played an important part on both sides of the debate. The Maryknoll sisters continued to send Speaker O'Neill letters. On 11 January 1985 they sent a press release informing O'Neill of Sister Nancy Donovan's kidnapping by the Contras, which must have brought back memories of the 1980 kidnappings and murders. Donovan's testimony described the murder of several Nicaraguan families and workers by Contras. In a follow up later on 18 January 1985 Sister Helene O'Sullivan sent a letter to O'Neill that explained the details regarding the detention of Donovan in Nicaragua. In the final paragraph of the letter she claimed that 40 people had been killed in the Limay area and pleaded,

Mr. Speaker, I urge you on behalf of the Maryknoll Sisters to oppose any funding for covert or overt operations against Nicaragua. The civilians in towns in northern Nicaragua are suffering and dying at the hands of the Contras. I would also ask that you urge that measures be taken to see that El Salvador, Honduras and Israel, all recipients of U.S. aid, are not illegally using some of this aid to

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<sup>5</sup> Serafino, 6.

fund the Contras. Another big question is that of private U.S. funding for the Contras (cf. New York Times, January 13, 1985).<sup>6</sup>

On 26 March Sister Donovan sent O'Neill a *Nicaragua Fact Sheet*, which detailed specific citizens murdered in Nicaragua by Contras between 9 December 1984 and 23 January 1985. In addition Sister Donovan included a chart that contrasted Sandinista *Advances in San Juan de Limay* between 1980 and 1985 with the *Destruction by Contras*.<sup>7</sup> In light of the finished result, namely Speaker O'Neill's determined opposition to Contra funding, one cannot underestimate the power of the NGO lobbying. Certainly O'Neill was a political opponent, certainly O'Neill understood that the Contras were an unpopular cause, however O'Neill did not oppose all of Reagan's foreign policy initiatives, and therefore one cannot help but note that O'Neill did exactly what the Maryknoll Sisters urged him to do.

The success of anti-Contra NGOs did not escape the administration's notice. In April 1985 conservatives countered the liberals by forming the NGO "Citizens for America," for the purpose of launching a public relations campaign to support Contra aid. Using Oliver North as a consultant they brought Central American business officials to various cities and lobbied key congressmen. However, they were out-shouted by liberal NGOs who had mobilized at the beginning of the year to oppose Reagan's plan. Led by

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<sup>6</sup>Letter to Tip O'Neill from Helene O'Sullivan, 18 January 1985, Tip O'Neill papers, Boston College.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Donovan, *Nicaragua Fact Sheet of Counter-revolutionary action against the civilian population of San Juan de Limay December 9, 1984 – January 23 1985*, (New York, Maryknoll Sisters, Tip O'Neill papers, Boston College), and Nancy Donovan *Press Statement* - Managua, 11 January 1985, (Tip O'Neill papers, Boston College) The Fact Sheet lists dozens of names of the people who were killed and others wounded or kidnapped.

Catholic and Protestant groups, this coalition specifically targeted swing votes in Congress on an unprecedented scale.<sup>8</sup> In the midst of this effort Speaker O'Neill turned control of the issue over to liberal wing of the party by appointing David Bonior as the head of the Task Force on Nicaragua.

Bonior first learned of the Contras in Congress and his first impression was that they were "terrorists trained on U.S. soil." He wasn't immediately sure if the Sandinistas were part of a larger communist imperial threat to the hemisphere, but he believed that they were more complex than the Reagan administration had portrayed them. Admittedly they were Marxist, but they were also heavily influenced by liberation theology, and had a strong agrarian populist component. Bonior firmly believed that the Sandinistas were a popular movement rather than a hostile takeover by totalitarian communist elite.<sup>9</sup> His overarching opposition to the Contras stemmed from their widespread human rights abuses. Bonior's information about Contra atrocities were provided by newspaper reports, eye-witness accounts from Nicaragua, the Catholic Church's various organizations on the ground in Nicaragua, and groups like WOLA. They were all

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<sup>8</sup> Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, 370-371. This coalition included The U.S. Catholic Conference, the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., and the American Baptists. Eventually this effort included 150 national organizations.

<sup>9</sup> Reagan said that the Nicaraguans were part of the Soviet world communist threat, and that we could not afford to have that threat. Reagan invoked the Monroe doctrine as a larger justification for the interference in Nicaraguan internal affairs. Congressmen like Bonior believed this was less fighting communism and more as a continuation of United States imperialist policies in Central America in the past. Bonior and his Democratic colleagues found this argument hardly convincing. He disagreed with historical United States policy in El Salvador, and Guatemala that he said led to the deaths of a quarter million people. Bonior firmly believed that the Sandinistas were a popular movement. David Bonior, *Interview with the Author*. 16 Nov 2004.

instrumental in providing Bonior specific information that he could present to Congress to illustrate the reality of the situation in Nicaragua. Trips that WOLA arranged for Congressmen to visit Nicaragua personally were particularly insightful. WOLA backed up these trips with regular updates using information gathered from a variety of secular and religious sources.<sup>10</sup> Like O'Neill, Bonior believed NGOs were an easily accessible, reliable source that he could turn to in order to get current and authentic information from Nicaragua. As the struggle against Contra aid continued, NGOs became a valuable arsenal of facts frequently quoted by the Democratic opposition and derided by Republican supporters of the president. In a speech to the Church of the Brethren in 1987 Bonior looked back at this time period and boasted that "...the churches throughout the country have been the single most important force working for peace in Central America." Bonior noted that public opinion consistently opposed aid to the Contras. He also listed the Reagan administration's consistent refusal to listen to the American public or Congress. He relayed the details of arms deals with Iran, human rights abuses at home, illegally mined harbors of Nicaragua, infamous details in CIA manuals, and charges that Contra leaders were selling drugs to finance the war in Nicaragua. He also reminded his audience that there were steady reports of Contra atrocities, causing "unbelievable suffering to the people of Nicaragua—crops destroyed, homes in ruin, families broken by the loss of father, mother, child, even grandparent." Bonior expressed hope that the developing Iran-Contra scandal would derail the Reagan administration's Contra policy.

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<sup>10</sup> David Bonior, *Interview with Author*, 16 Nov 2004.

In the interim he encouraged his audience to lobby their member of Congress to oppose Contra aid, and to continue raising their voice against war in Nicaragua.<sup>11</sup>

Reagan's call for renewed Contra aid in early 1985 pleased few in either party, but had flashes of innovation and political savvy. The Republicans considered Contra aid as either unachievable or an unwanted distraction from more pressing issues. Democrats generally opposed it, but many feared that opposing Contra aid would portray them as soft on defense. Reagan's compromise proposal of 4 April 1985 to use approved Contra aid solely as humanitarian supplies if the Sandinistas agreed to a cease fire by 1 June 1985 put his opponents on the defensive and encouraged Contra backers. Both sides used NGOs to lobby the critical swing voters, by the time the votes took place 23-24 April 1985, 150 National organizations had made their opinions known concerning Contra aid.<sup>12</sup> The amended bill lost in a vote of 123-303. Despite Reagan's popularity and recent landslide reelection, no aid of any kind had been provided to the Contras.<sup>13</sup> This was a massive victory for the liberal Democrats and the NGOs who tirelessly organized against Contra aid. The victory was short lived however, and they soon learned how quickly the Sandinistas could frustrate their allies in America.

The Sandinistas, on the verge of certain victory against Reagan and the anti-communist forces in the region, made a colossal blunder. On 23 April 1985, immediately following the vote denying Reagan funding for the Contras, President Ortega announced that he would be traveling to the Soviet Union in May to meet with General Secretary

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<sup>11</sup> Bonior Papers, box 69.

<sup>12</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 367-370.

<sup>13</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 372-3.

Mikhail Gorbachev. The Sandinistas, concerned about maintaining good relations with the Soviets had decreed three days of national mourning following General Secretary Konstantin Chernenko's death in March. While it was in the Sandinistas' interest to keep good relations with Moscow, this trip to visit the Soviet Union seemed to prove the Reagan administration's charges of communist collaboration between the Sandinistas and the Soviets and dealt a serious blow to those who opposed funding the Contras in Congress. Immediately, embarrassed moderates began to express regret concerning their vote against Contra funding.<sup>14</sup> NGOs who opposed Contra funding watched helplessly as all their momentum slipped away.<sup>15</sup>

In this charged atmosphere Representative Bonior made a fact finding trip to Central America with Representative George Miller. Secretary of State George Shultz was confident enough in the Contra cause to encourage a personal trip to the region. Others, namely Representative Richard Cheney, saw it as a potential threat and formally complained to Speaker Tip O'Neill about the partisan nature of the trip.<sup>16</sup> The report provided to the Speaker by Mr. Bonior and Mr. Miller noted the heightened tensions between the United States and Nicaragua. The itinerary included appointments with U.S. Ambassador Harry Bergold, private sector leader Jaime Bengoechea, and owners and editorial board of the opposition newspaper *La Prensa*. Hosted by the United States ambassador, they took time to meet with other Nicaraguan businessmen, leaders of the

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<sup>14</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 376.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 264-5.

<sup>16</sup> Letter to Representative Dick Cheney from Speaker O'Neill, 3 June 1985. Bonior Papers, box 139, CIA folder.

political opposition to the Sandinistas, and diplomats from other countries. In addition Bonior and Miller met with local residents of Masaya and Granada and observed conditions there. The report summarized that the 1 May 1985 U.S. trade embargo was likely to impose the heaviest toll on poor Nicaraguans. The resulting economic shortages of basic commodities would not necessarily translate into support for the Contras. Bonior and Miller noted that those who opposed the Sandinista government also opposed the economic embargo. They believed that the U.S. government was abandoning them through the move.

The report also included updates on the critical issue of political and press freedom in Nicaragua. The Sandinista government insisted that in times of war the government should be able to censor the press, while the senior editors and owners of *La Prensa* resented having to negotiate with the government over rights that they believed were inherent. *La Prensa* was also skeptical that the Sandinista government would separate the party from the state, permit full freedom of political parties, or end the Sandinista Defense Committees.<sup>17</sup>

Another issue that Bonior and Miller found troubling was President Ortega's recent trip to Moscow, and the evidence of a close relationship between Nicaragua and the Soviet Union. However, striving to put the trip in perspective, the report pointed out that the trip also included stops in several Western European nations which had friendly relations with the United States.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Bonior and Miller concluded in their report that the Sandinistas commanded strong internal political support in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan army was also in firm control of the conflict with the Contras. This information called into question whether or not the desired increase in Contra military strength from 15,000 to 35,000 would affect the larger Reagan administration's purpose of changing the Nicaraguan government.

Overall, Bonior and Miller concluded that

the current course of U.S. policy is counterproductive to the democratization of Nicaragua and detrimental to the economic well-being of Nicaraguan citizens. Military pressure on the Sandinistas does not appear to have strengthened the chances for political pluralism within Nicaragua. Nor have economic sanctions slowed the overtures of the Nicaraguans to the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc for aid.

Indeed, we firmly believe that U.S. policy is producing precisely what it purportedly seeks to avoid: greater restrictions on civil liberties and independent political activity, and an economically bankrupt Nicaragua increasingly dependent on Communist countries for economic and military supplies needed to repel the Contras.<sup>18</sup>

Bonior's point of view, supported by evidence gathered on his visit to Nicaragua, was that the United States' efforts were not leading toward democracy, but economic desperation. The Contras were inept militarily, indeed in late 1985 significant numbers of Contras had retreated to their bases in Honduras, while the Sandinistas had begun to employ their new Soviet helicopter gun-ships, utilize their increased number of soldiers, and reap the benefits of relocating the northern supporters of the Contras. The Sandinistas were unable to fix the economy. Despite their strong military position their economy was

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<sup>18</sup> Report transmitted to Speaker O'Neill concerning the fact-finding trip to Nicaragua. May 3-6, 1985. Bonior Papers, Box 139, CIA folder. David Bonior made 30 some trips to Nicaragua. Interview with Author, 16 Nov 2004. One might scoff at the ability of these trips to change a politician's mind, but Kagan notes that Democrat Les Aspin changed his mind after traveling to Nicaragua. Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 458.

in tatters, of their neighbors only Haiti, Bolivia, and Honduras were in worse shape.<sup>19</sup> Basically United States' sanctions were slowly strangling the Nicaraguan government and the Soviets desires to normalize relations with the United States and their own economic woes made adequate economic help to Nicaragua increasingly unlikely. This combination of factors in Bonior's mind made democratic gains in Nicaragua less likely, and United States policy counterproductive.

However, Bonior's detailed report persuaded few in Congress. Clearly Congress was concerned about the cozy relationship between Nicaragua and the Soviet Union. Led by Congressman Dave McCurdy of Oklahoma, moderates pushed for significant humanitarian aid to the Contras. Overriding critics' complaints that this bill would allow the Contras to use the money they saved to purchase arms, on 12 June 1985 the House approved McCurdy's bill and resumed humanitarian aid to the Contras. This \$27 million humanitarian aid package initiated an era of solid United States support for the Contras that would not be rescinded until February 1988. Despite their best efforts in 1985 NGOs and liberal Democrats in Congress could not permanently alter the conventional wisdom that communists were advancing around the world. It seemed therefore foolhardy to allow a communist government in the same hemisphere.<sup>20</sup> Again and again the NGOs and allied lawmakers successfully framed the argument that it was not about communism, but human rights. However, time and again, even after Contra aid requests had been voted down, the Sandinistas embarrassed their allies by restricting freedoms or committing

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<sup>19</sup> Kagan, 403-407.

<sup>20</sup> Ryan, U.S. Sandinista Diplomatic Relations, 92.

atrocities. These actions simply vindicated Reagan's policies and portrayed the NGOs and their allies in Congress as naive. In order to turn the tables on the Reagan administration, the anti-Contra coalition hoped that the Reagan administration would make a similar blunder, which is exactly what happened in October of 1986.

In the fall of 1986 Congress approved \$100 million in aid to the Contras, and lifted CIA participation in the aid program. Congress did however state that funds, material, or other assistance to the Contras could only be administered as directed by Congress. While Congress was debating the issue, the Reagan administration, fearful that the Contras would disintegrate in the interim, was actively working to solicit funds from allied governments and divert funds from illegal arms sales to maintain the Contras' fighting ability.

Ironically, it is unlikely that the Contras received significant benefit from the illegal diversion of funds that became the Iran-Contra scandal. Estimates range from \$600,000 to \$4 million dollars worth of tangible supplies, certainly not enough benefit to risk the survival of the policy. However, the damage done to the foreign policy initiative of the Reagan administration was catastrophic.<sup>21</sup>

On 5 October 1986 a plane flying supplies to the Contras was shot down by the Sandinistas and its pilot taken alive. Incriminating evidence linked the pilot to United States government officials and splashed the scandal across newspaper headlines. On 2 November an American hostage was released by his captors in Lebanon. As the details

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<sup>21</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 481. Kagan analyzes the numbers and concludes that no more than \$2 million worth of tangible benefits were transferred to the Contras between January and October 1986. He further notes that this was far less than the less controversial \$32 million they received from Saudi Arabia.

became public it became clear that the arms bought and flown into Nicaragua were linked to the release of a hostage in the Middle East. As the scandal unfolded it became evident that the United States sold missiles to Iran for an extremely high price in exchange for persuading their Lebanese allies to release American hostages. The money, in addition to funds raised through private donors and allies like Saudi Arabia, was then used to purchase military materials for the Contras and delivered through intermediaries connected to the CIA. The operation was overseen by National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane and placed under the direction of Lt. Colonel Oliver North. The resulting scandal dropped Reagan's approval rating from 67 percent to 46 percent and seemed to give the momentum back to those opposing aid to the Contras<sup>22</sup> as the public's confidence in the administration's handling of foreign policy toward Nicaragua situation dropped to 23 percent.<sup>23</sup>

In the long term President Reagan's job approval numbers regarding his Nicaragua policy did not budge considerably, but one could argue that the Contra program had always had very little support in polls. What had saved the Contra policy in the past was Reagan's seemingly unassailable personal popularity. What the Iran-Contra scandal did was to take away his popularity, and made it much more difficult to convince moderates in Congress to vote with him for Contra aid.

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<sup>22</sup> Coerver, Don M and Linda B. Hall, *Tangled Destinies: Latin America and the United States*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999) 166-168. Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 482.

<sup>23</sup> Sobel, *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy*, 25.

Despite the scandal, moderate Democrats knew that they needed political cover in case the Sandinistas showed additional signs of working with the Soviet Union.

Therefore the moderates in Congress were reluctant to press forward to cut off Contra funding completely. However, committed activists worked to push the moderates fully out of the Contra aid camp. This massive event labeled the “April Mobilization,” was already in planning stages when the Iran-Contra scandal hit and the activists believed it had great potential for helping to defeat the Reagan Doctrine. Anti-Contra activists hoped that the attention generated by the scandal might help mobilize their grassroots supporters. The Iran-Contra affair was the opening they had been waiting for.

As the Iran-Contra scandal dragged on into the spring of 1987, activists maintained their hope that the scandal would derail President Reagan’s Contra program. They believed a weakened Reagan administration was no match for the combined weight of public opinion, noisy activists, and a Democrat-controlled Congress.<sup>24</sup> Starting in November the momentum seemed to shift for the activists. With the damaging revelation that the United States had sold arms to Iran, and that proceeds of the sales had been diverted to the Contras, activists hoped for a 1973 Watergate hearing type effect on Congress. The March 1987 vote to deny Contras \$40 million of the \$100 million approved in 1986 passed the House, but went down in a close vote in the Senate. The coalition against Contra aid expected another vote in September of 1987 and began strategizing to defeat the bill. The coalition decided to focus its energy on a group of

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<sup>24</sup> Beverly Bickel, Philip Brenner, and William LeoGrande, *Challenging the Reagan Doctrine: A summation of the April 25th mobilization*, 39, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 66.

inconsistent swing voters in both the House and the Senate. This group tended to shift back and forth and was big enough to determine the outcome of each Contra aid vote.<sup>25</sup>

As hopeful as current events had made them, NGOs and their allies in Congress still prepared for an “April Mobilization” with level-headed realism. They understood that single-event demonstrations rarely had a dramatic effect. They also expected that there would be little credit given to them by members of Congress who could not admit to being pressured into changing their votes by a demonstration.<sup>26</sup> In light of those truths they set their sights on small goals for the mobilization. 1) Provide a public forum to express citizen outrage at the Reagan administration’s interventionist foreign policy. 2) Demonstrate to policy makers the high domestic political costs of continuing and escalating U.S. intervention in Central America and southern Africa. 3) Broaden the public debate over U.S. foreign policy in general and the Reagan Doctrine in particular. 4) Broaden the anti-intervention, anti-apartheid movement through the sponsorship of the organized labor movement and the religious community, and maximize the linkage of the two foreign policy focuses of Central America and southern Africa to build the Peace and Justice Movement.<sup>27</sup> After the mobilization was over the steering committee hired researchers to discover what, if anything, had been accomplished. The report, based on

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<sup>25</sup> Bickel, *Challenging the Reagan Doctrine*, 39-40.

<sup>26</sup> There are probably a host of psychological reasons for this, but clearly politicians do not want to appear poll-driven or intimidated by demonstrators. In the research done for this project the only admitted reason I found for changing one’s mind on an issue was if the legislator learned new information about the issue through education efforts or a turn of events that made them consider old information in a new way. The reader will simply have to judge whether the circumstantial evidence is for or against the activists’ changing a politician’s mind.

<sup>27</sup> Bickel, *Challenging the Reagan Doctrine*, 43.

over 120 interviews with members of the steering committee, the mobilization staff, funders, local organizers, congress people, and their aides, concluded that the mobilization failed to reach its modest goals. Perhaps most telling in the report is the repeated mention of the fact that the march was hurt by the rainy conditions on the day of the mobilization. One could legitimately ask how your coalition could hope to succeed against the Reagan administration if it allowed itself to be deterred by rain in April?

The first goal, “*provide a public forum to express citizen outrage at the Reagan administration’s interventionist foreign policy,*” was a limited success. The mobilization attracted tens of thousands of marchers and activists for the weekend activities. One hundred and seventy local coalitions organized 100,000 marchers for the April 25<sup>th</sup> rally at the Capitol. While at the capitol the marchers challenged Congress to oppose the Reagan doctrine. Additionally 700 people attended an Interfaith Service for Peace and Justice. Hundreds more participated in the teach-ins on Central America and southern Africa. Hundreds more were arrested for blocking the entrances to the CIA headquarters, 1500 more held a rally in support of those being arrested. Hundreds visited congressional offices. Despite these large numbers the organizers thought that the number could and should have been much larger. In the six months leading up to the mobilization, local and national organizers worked to build momentum and broaden opposition to U.S. military intervention in Central America. This work included Sister City projects, material aid campaigns, letter writing campaigns to Congress, and tours to the region. The goal was to have the April Mobilization simply become a culmination of a grassroots protest movement instead of a single event. The organizers hoped that the escalation of opposition would match the escalation of the Reagan administration’s efforts for

intervention around the world. However, many problems plagued the organizers. The steering committee's attempts to bring unlikely allies, like organized labor and religious groups, were met with debates about proper strategies and tactics. Essentially, if policy makers would have noticed that there were both religious groups, and union representatives marching together and took the time to talk with both groups, they would have gotten different messages from both groups. This reality softened the influence of the significant size and diversity of the crowds. The steering committee also failed to publicize the event properly and missed an opportunity to include or even inform critical policy makers about the event. Even simple matters like a national leaflet publicizing and poster distribution were not attended to properly, which left many wondering exactly what the protests were all about. The first goal, "*provide a public forum to express citizen outrage at the Reagan administration's interventionist foreign policy,*" was successful in that people came to Washington and expressed disapproval, but their voice was not sufficiently loud or focused to effect significant change.<sup>28</sup>

The second goal, "*demonstrate to policy makers the high domestic political costs of continuing and escalating U.S. intervention in Central America and southern Africa,*" was considered an outright failure. The April Mobilization report stated:

Policy makers knew very little about the mobilization. Members of Congress received no information from the coalition and few were visited during the mobilization. Elected officials, in particular in Washington, D.C. were not involved with the local or national coalition and received little and late information.

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<sup>28</sup> Bickel, *Challenging the Reagan Doctrine*, 44-45.

The report also noted that the media coverage portrayed the mobilization as a “throw back to the 60s” instead of the wide-appeal new coalition that they had designed and worked for. This was extremely disappointing to the steering committee. They had hoped to send a strong message to Congress as a whole and particularly to those who were inconsistent voters on the issues of Central America and southern Africa. Instead swing voters often learned about the coalition from right-wing sources and conservative voices in the press who attacked the coalition. The report noted the lack of trust between groups that made up the coalition and lack of experience in lobbying Congress. The report gave specific examples:

...there was no targeted outreach (invitations or information packets) done to Congress. No effort was made to include members in discussions about the initial conception of the mobilization, or to seek their endorsements. Thus congressional staff did not have the basic facts about the mobilization. They did not encourage and organize congressional members or their staffs to participate in the march...In general, elected officials at all levels were neglected as a sector in terms of planning the march, working with the media or speaking at the rally.

The report also noted the lack of attention paid to the media. This was particularly harmful to the mobilization’s efforts because of the media’s role in shaping both policy makers and constituents’ opinion on matters. The press was utilized, but only by the opposition to the mobilization who framed the protestors as typical activists and troublemakers. The report suggested that the media work could have been improved by strategic advertisements, paid media consultants, specific media projects, and recruitment of well-known spokespeople. However, the conclusion was that the efforts to *demonstrate to policy makers the high domestic political costs of continuing and escalating U.S. intervention in Central America and southern Africa*, turned out to be a

bust as their demonstrations failed to attract the attention of the majority of policy makers and the United States public.<sup>29</sup>

The third goal was to “*broaden the public debate over U.S. foreign policy in general and the Reagan Doctrine in particular,*” which was lauded in the report as a significant step forward. The report noted that “the mobilization was an important step forward in making the debate over U.S. foreign policy public.” This is hard to prove especially since they admitted their failure to get the public’s attention. The report first noted the failure of the benefit concert, which actually lost money, and failed to attract any hi-caliber artists who had strong anti-intervention and anti-apartheid sentiments. A public debate was generated inside the labor movement, which according to the report, was labor’s first public challenge, in many years, to U.S. foreign policy. The report also noted the debate within the religious community spurred by widespread denominational leadership participation in the mobilization. However, without clear evidence to support this assertion it is hard to prove that the debate over United States foreign policy was significantly broadened.<sup>30</sup>

The final stated goal was to “*broaden the anti-intervention, anti-apartheid movement through the sponsorship of the organized labor movement and the religious community. Maximize the linkage of the two foreign policy focuses of Central America*

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<sup>29</sup> Bickel, *Challenging the Reagan Doctrine*, 45-46. In a particular telling quote on page 42, the authors of the report said, “Not one respondent said the march had a significant impact on the Congress, and no one believed it will have had much effect on any votes.”

<sup>30</sup> Bickel, *Challenging the Reagan Doctrine*, 46-47.

*and southern Africa to build the Peace and Justice movement.*” The report could not conclusively judge its success or failure. The report did boast that:

Organizers built a steering committee of 35 national organizations from the labor, religious, peace and justice, anti-apartheid, and Central America solidarity sectors of the movement. There was a national staff of twelve organizers and 170 local coalitions from almost every state. The labor and religious leaders were active at all levels of the organizing and labor, in particular, was responsible for a sizeable contingent at the mobilization. The coming together of this coalition represented a new and significant potential participation of the organized labor movement and the religious community, representing millions of people, meant a potential expansion of the movement which could fundamentally strengthen its capacity to challenge U.S. foreign policy in the future.

The report also noted that it could greatly expand its reach if it better recruited “communities of color.” It mourned the fact that black and Latin communities had not been educated or mobilized since those communities were often the first to become disillusioned with United States foreign policy. Finally, the coalition lamented its response to “right wing attacks and red-baiting.” They concluded that its response to those verbal attacks were too weak to be picked up by the general public.<sup>31</sup>

The coalition recognized that its strengths and weaknesses were the same as the strengths and weaknesses of the progressive movement as a whole. Because there was not a progressive political party or national organization, there was little opportunity to use the mobilization as a catalyst to create an ongoing forum for political discussion. They simply were not able to take the energy and momentum they created and channel into a sustainable force for lasting change in United States foreign policy. However, they did put forward action steps to make the next mass action more effective. Learning from the mistakes, the coalition recommended the following steps. 1) Reach an explicit agreement

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<sup>31</sup> Bickel, *Challenging the Reagan Doctrine*, 46-49.

about the relative importance and balance between the dual goals of changing policy and building the movement. 2) Develop a comprehensive strategy and tactics to influence policy makers. 3) Develop a professional strategy to maximize the media exposure of any coalition's politics, as well as the debates and controversies generated by its efforts. 4) Address squarely the issue of racism in the movement and develop a conscious plan to desegregate the movement and assure the central participation of Afro-American, Latin, and other communities of color. 5) Develop a strategy to respond to red-baiting. 6) Determine the appropriate character of the coalition in terms of membership and leadership.<sup>32</sup>

If the April Mobilization had simply come and gone without evaluating its goals, strengths and weaknesses, its lasting impact would have been negligible. However, the effort to learn from the past and clear proposals to improve the next mass action proved invaluable when the broad coalition of NGOs next attempted to block funding for the Contras.

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<sup>32</sup> Bickel, *Challenging the Reagan Doctrine*, 51-52.

## CHAPTER 5

### FORGING OR FINDING AN ALTERNATE POLICY TRACK

Following the Iran-Contra scandal, the fate of Contra aid hung delicately in the balance. While Reagan's popularity had plummeted, there still was no viable foreign policy alternative to replace funding the Contras. With the help of moderates in the Senate, administration supporters were able to turn aside narrowly a House effort to block the final \$40 million of the appropriation. However, the vote showed the Reagan administration that support for the Contras was gone in the House and waning in the Senate.<sup>1</sup> As part of their strategic retreat the Reagan administration decided to put off the \$140 million appropriation request designed to carry the Contra aid program through to the end of his term.

However, the Reagan administration chose to use the increased media attention to attempt to make its case to the American public about the dangerous character of the Sandinistas. As part of this effort the Department of State put out a publication titled, *Mothers of Political Prisoners*. David Bonior received his copy in mid June 1987. The report detailed abuse of political prisoners and their advocates by the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. While House Democrats acknowledged that the Sandinistas were no angels,

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Greenhouse, "Congress Leaders Regard Contra Aid As Still In Doubt," *New York Times*, 26 July 1987, National Desk.

they countered by pointing out the much more serious human rights violations of the Contras.<sup>2</sup>

In order to focus on opposition against Contra funding, David Bonior briefed members of the Nicaragua Task Force on ways to speak effectively about the issue. The Task Force subsequently focused one minute speeches on the Iran-Contra hearings, drew attention to Contra “corruption and ineffectiveness,” and spoke highly of more viable alternatives. The official memorandum to Democrats from Deputy Majority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-MD) asked them to highlight Republican quotes that alleged that supporting the Contra cause was “like pouring money down a sink hole.”<sup>3</sup> The memorandum also highlighted the amount of money given to the Contras that had gone unaccounted for, and noted the ineffectual nature of Contra resistance possibly leading the way for American troop involvement in Nicaragua. In these speeches one could clearly see the effectiveness of information given to members of the Task Force by NGOs. On 23 July 1987 Witness for Peace sent around a mailer to their supporters. On the mailer it stated,

Yesterday an unusual thing happen(ed) on the floor of the House. Twenty-two Democrats gave one minute speeches against Contra aid. The theme of their messages was the human cost of the war. Their source was Witness for Peace documentation and photos! Member after member talked about Contra abuses that had been documented by WFP longtermers. They enlarged about 7 WFP photos depicting victims of the war and displayed them on easels in the background

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<sup>2</sup> J. Edward Fox, memorandum to Representative, June 18, 1987. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 62/ One Minutes.

<sup>3</sup> Memorandum to Democrats Doing One Minutes on the Contras, Steny Hoyer *Deputy Majority Whip*, Maryland Rep 5<sup>th</sup> District. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 62/ One Minutes.

while they spoke about on-going abuses...it was aired nationally on C-Span and was amazing to watch!!<sup>4</sup>

The members of the Nicaragua Task Force were relieved to have the specific evidence provided by NGO Witness for Peace as they had to counter the most compelling testimony in the Iran-Contra hearings, the slide show of Lt. Col. Oliver North. North's slide show convincingly made the case that the Soviets supported the Sandinistas for strategic reasons. It also proposed that the Soviets had made their intentions clear as recently as 1983 to support revolution and had managed to spend a considerable amount of money supporting revolution both economically and militarily in Latin America. North showed pictures of the Soviet equipment in Cuba, and Soviet military equipment found in El Salvador and Grenada. North also showed Soviet military equipment in Nicaragua, bases built in accordance to Soviet design, port improvements, and Soviet Attack Helicopters stationed in Nicaragua. North also noted the desires of the Nicaraguans to further export the revolution, and explained the plight of those who have become refugees due to the Sandinistas' persecution. The slide show ended with a plea for continued United States' support for "Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters."<sup>5</sup>

Responding to North's impressive presentation took precedence over anything else political. In their file cabinets anti-Contra members of Congress had plenty of

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<sup>4</sup> Excerpt from Witness for Peace Mailing. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 62/ One Minutes. Not only did WFP supply photos they distributed investigative report booklets that detailed civilian casualties. The report found in David Bonior's papers, *Civilian Victims of the U.S. Contra War July 1986-January 1987*, described thirty different instances of Contra attacks killing Nicaraguan civilians.

<sup>5</sup> Captions for Slide Presentation on Soviet Threat to Western Hemisphere. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 62/ One Minutes.

ammunition. Witness for Peace had been steadily supplying them with information. They provided a weekly Nicaragua Hotline that detailed civilian casualties in the ongoing war.<sup>6</sup> Witness for Peace also sent out a compelling digest that detailed Contra human rights abuses.<sup>7</sup> Their compelling information did not go uncontested, however. Congressmen like Bonior were forced to defend Witness for Peace on the floor of Congress. However the Democrats intended to keep the upper hand. On 23 July Bonior sent Speaker Wright a memo outlining the strategy for the fall.<sup>8</sup> Bonior began by noting that President Reagan, encouraged by the success of North's testimony, was rumored to be trying to use the boost in the polls to restate his Contra policy. He recommended that Representative Lee Hamilton (D-IN) give the response to Reagan's upcoming address and recommended that Democrats take this opportunity to restate their objections to the Contra aid. Bonior expected that the administration's request would be in the neighborhood of \$120 to \$150 million in aid, likely coming shortly after the congress returned from its Labor Day recess. Unlike the Spring Moratorium legislation, which had been defeated, the procedures on the vote favored opponents of Contra aid. In order to pass new support for the Contras the Administration needed both the support of both houses of Congress. Bonior noted that the best predictor of the coming vote was the recent Moratorium vote

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<sup>6</sup> Sam Hope, Jean Walsh, Memo to Congressperson. March 24, 1987. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 62/ One Minutes.

<sup>7</sup> Witness For Peace Reports Digest, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 62/ One Minutes.

<sup>8</sup> David E Bonior, letter to Speaker Wright, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 185/ Memo to Speaker.

which passed the House 230-196 and was defeated in the Senate 48-52. Senator Terry Sanford, Democrat from North Carolina, had been picked up by the anti-Contra forces, so Bonior only needed to pick up two more votes in the Senate. Bonior informed Speaker Wright that he expected the administration to make an “all out effort to win this one,” and pointed out that former Representative Tom Loeffler had been appointed by the White House to be the administration’s chief lobbyist for the effort.

As the Nicaragua Taskforce planned for the upcoming fall vote, they discussed how best to convince enough swing voters to vote against Contra aid. Thirty-two members of the Taskforce had met on July 8 and took assignments on the swing list. The swing list had names of 48 Democrats and 34 Republicans who had been identified as swing members on the issue. Those swing members had been polled and only five had switched since North’s testimony (three Democrats had begun to lean toward funding the Contras and two Republicans had joined the anti-Contra side). In order to generate enthusiasm for the anti-Contra efforts members of the Taskforce participated in Special Orders,<sup>9</sup> sent “Dear Colleague,” letters<sup>10</sup> and participated in One Minute Speeches on the Contras that specifically addressed the nature of Contra human rights abuses. Bonior’s one minute speech was as follows:

Mr. Speaker, Long after the lights have faded from the Iran-Contra hearings, the American people will remember who the Contras are.

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<sup>9</sup> Special Orders speeches are speeches at the end of the day that do not pertain to pending legislative business.

<sup>10</sup> Dear Colleague” letters are official correspondence distributed in bulk to Members in both chambers. Primarily, they are used by one or more Members to persuade others to cosponsor or oppose a bill (generally, prior to introduction). R. Eric Petersen, CRS Report for Congress, 4 January 2005.

The Contras commit atrocities. They use land mines that kill more civilians than soldiers. They attack poorly defended villages, firing their machine guns indiscriminately. They bayonet pregnant women and children.

But the most atrocious crime the Contras have committed is to wage a war for six long years against the Nicaraguan people without any hope of military victory. Not a single town has been seized...no territory has been taken.

Mr. Speaker, today we will see the faces of the Contras' victims. The faces of innocent children...of women...and the elderly.

The faces of health care professionals...church workers...teachers...and poor peasants.

In war, no one wins and everyone loses. If there is a message to be gleaned from the faces of these innocent victims, it is simply this: The Contra war must end...and it must end now.

Continued United States Funding of a rebel force which has no hope of military victory would surely be the most detestable, atrocious, immoral crime that has yet been committed in this long, ugly struggle.

Today, I call upon my colleagues for their help in drawing a swift, complete close to further funding for the Contras.<sup>11</sup>

NGOs appreciated Bonior's speech and let him know. On 30 July 1987 NGO leader Gretchen Eick wrote to Congressman Bonior, thanking him for, "Speaking out against the Contras on July 22. The Witness for Peace photographs and documentation of Contra abuses are certainly appropriate inspiration for your address." Eick also thanked Bonior for defending, "Witness for Peace and other religious organizations seeking to document human rights abuses in Nicaragua..."<sup>12</sup>

Beyond bulk letters and speeches the Taskforce had further plans. Bonior scheduled two dinners, on 28 July and 5 August. They were hosted by the Majority Leader, the Whip, and the Chief Deputy Whip. A small group of swing members were

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<sup>11</sup> Bonior, David E. *Who are the Contras?*, Speech 23 July 1987. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 62/ One Minutes.

<sup>12</sup> Gretchen Eick, Letter to David Bonior, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 62/ One Minutes. Eick was the Associate for Policy Advocacy for the United Church of Christ, Office for Church in Society located in Washington D.C.

invited to each dinner to discuss United States policy in Central America with Ambassadors Viron Vaky and Lawrence Pezullo. Bonior also took advantage of Labor's new interest in foreign affairs following the April Mobilization. The Taskforce recruited 10-15 top labor lobbyists to become active against Contra aid. Dick Warden of the United Auto Workers (UAW) agreed to chair the group and agreed to lobbying assignments and efforts to provide grassroots support. Bonior also met with House leaders and major church, human rights, and peace groups who lobbied on Contra aid. Out of this collection of groups came a campaign called Countdown 87 which was to take a systematic approach to influencing swing voters. Bonior also directed efforts to develop a viable alternative policy on Central America. The Chief Deputy Whip personally contacted nearly every Member of the swing list to determine what each Member would like to see in a policy alternative. According to his research, the most commonly mentioned themes were:

- 1) a clear indication that the U.S. will draw the line against any threat from the Sandinistas
- 2) addressing the question of resettling the Contras
- 3) a broad program of support for the democracies in the region
- 4) support for the Arias peace initiative.

Finally Bonior's strategy included two last projects. The first was "The Arias Initiative." President Oscar Arias Sanchez of Costa Rica was the most consistent voice for peace in Latin America. Because of Arias' influence several House Members indicated to Bonior that they were interested in hearing Arias speak to a joint session of

Congress. He realized that there was some risk of having a foreign leader address a partisan issue inside the United States, but still believed it would work to their advantage. The second was to arrange trips to the region. Bonior believed that trips to Nicaragua had helped influence moderate House Members in the past. He hoped that the Majority Leader or someone else greatly respected by the moderates could lead the trip.<sup>13</sup>

The media caught onto the strategy immediately. On July 26<sup>th</sup> the *New York Times* reported that North's compelling testimony would likely have little lasting result. The article noted that North's testimony had increased public support for the Contras up from 28% in January to 40% in July. Despite Reagan's confident assertions to the contrary, Republican Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana concluded that the hearings helped to convince Americans that the Sandinistas were "a very unfortunate Government," but failed to convince a significant amount of the public that the Contras were a viable remedy. The *New York Times* article also noted that the behavior of the rebels themselves would likely continue to provide a powerful argument against continued aid. In those two lines of argument lay the strategies of the competing sides. The pro-Contra camp was greatly encouraged by the result of the hearings and hoped that this surge in the polls would continue if the Contras had some key victories in the field. The anti-Contra camp acknowledged North's accomplishment, but stressed the fact that the polls were still decisively against aid for the Contras. The key statistic kept by the chief deputy whip regarding the fate of Contra funding was that none of the 75 key swing

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<sup>13</sup> Bonior to Wright, 23 July 1987, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 185/ Memo to Speaker.

votes in the funding debate had been persuaded by North's display.<sup>14</sup> The anti-Contra camp also pointed out that while the Sandinistas weren't angels, the Contras had a track record of terror. Providing evidence of bad behavior was the strong suit of the NGOs who continued to work feverishly to prevent future Contra funding. The reports by the NGOs and the number of swing voters would both continue to be forefront on the minds of those who engaged in this war of words, photographs, studies, and opinion polls.

In August the battle for public opinion in the papers and public forums continued. On 1 August Vice President George Bush traveled to South Dakota and Iowa to deliver a speech critical of the Sandinistas and to answer questions from a group of several hundred local residents. Bush was confronted by the brother of Benjamin Linder, an American engineer slain in Nicaragua on April 28. The exchange was highly emotional and included the specific details of Linder's death. Linder had been part of the NGO Nicaragua Appropriate Technology Project. Bush countered the graphic and damning report of Linder's death with the report that Linder had been holding a weapon at his death. Mr. Bush also gently added that he mourned the death of every American.<sup>15</sup> The hits kept coming concerning the Contras' human rights record. On 2 August the *New York Times* reported that the Association for Human Rights had corroborated accounts of more than a dozen abuses between August 1985 and April 1987. While the State Department pointed out that the amount of human rights abuses were rather small for the

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<sup>14</sup>Greenhouse, Linda, "Congress Leaders Regard Contra Aid As Still In Doubt," *New York Times*, 26 July 1987, National Desk. Bonior is quoted in the article as saying, "We are not seeing any loss."

<sup>15</sup> Gerald M. Boyd. *New York Times*, August 1, 1987.

time period, the number was still considered significant because the source was one known to be sympathetic to the Reagan administration.<sup>16</sup> On 4 August the chairmen and vice chairmen of the Iran-Contra committees ended the public section of the hearings with closing remarks. These remarks were significant in what they admitted and also revealed the continuing debate on the Contra funding. Representative Dick Cheney (Wyoming) admitted that mistakes were made by the Administration but countered that there were mitigating factors, “factors which, while they don’t justify Administration mistakes, go a long way to helping explain and make them understandable.” Among these factors was the “vital importance of keeping the Nicaraguan democratic resistance alive until Congress could reverse itself and repeal the Boland Amendment.” Cheney was also concerned about “Congressional vacillation and uncertainty about our policies in Central America.”<sup>17</sup>

On 6 August the *New York Times* reported that President Reagan had put forth a peace plan jointly with both parties in Congress. The statement put out by the White House press secretary was brief but to the point, and what was notable in the release was the bipartisan tone of the announcement. The conclusion of the statement read:

I applaud this bipartisan effort in Congress and I express the hope that it will produce a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Nicaragua. I urge other nations of the world to join in the support of this effort and refrain from activities that would jeopardize it.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Milt Freudenheim, Katherine Roberts, and James F. Clarity. “Report Describes Contra Violations,” *New York Times*, 2 August 1987.

<sup>17</sup> “Iran-Contra Hearings: Summing Up a Summer’s Work; Final Remarks by Leaders of the Panels: A Litany of Mistakes,” *New York Times*, 4 August, 1987.

<sup>18</sup> Statement by the President 5 August 1987, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 62/ Peace Plan.

While some Democrats believed it was a political rather than a sincere move, it did receive support from Speaker Jim Wright and tentative support from David Bonior. The plan restated the United States' interests in Nicaragua.

1. That there be no Soviet, Cuban or Communist block bases established in Nicaragua that pose a threat to the United States and the other democratic governments in the hemisphere.
2. That Nicaragua pose no military threat to its neighbor countries nor provide a staging ground for subversion or destabilization of duly elected governments in the hemisphere.
3. That the Nicaraguan government respect the basic human rights of its people including political rights guaranteed in the Nicaraguan constitution and pledges made to the OAS – free speech, free press, religious liberty and a regularly established system of free, orderly elections.<sup>19</sup>

In order to “bring an immediate end to hostilities and begin a process of reconciliation,” the plan called for an immediate cease-fire between Nicaraguan government troops and rebels, the halt of all foreign aid to either side, immediate regional negotiations, a comprehensive plan of national reconciliation, and a conditional trade and aid program for Nicaragua.<sup>20</sup> The Contras immediately expressed willingness to discuss the plan, and senior officials from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras said that they were “gratified by Mr. Reagan’s decision to offer a diplomatic alternative to the current American policy of supporting the Contras in order to put pressure on Nicaragua.”<sup>21</sup>

However, while initially welcoming the idea of peace, the Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega rejected many of the central positions. The Sandinistas refused to discuss internal

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Statement by President Reagan, p3.

<sup>20</sup> Steven V Roberts, “Reagan Reports ‘General’ Accord on Latin Proposal,” *New York Times*, 6 August, 1987.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Kinzer, “Nicaragua Says It’s Willing to Discuss the Reagan Plan,” *New York Times*, 6 August, 1987.

Nicaraguan policies and rejected direct talks with the Contras. They also hinted that they believed the peace plan was a farce, what Reagan really wanted, according to the Sandinistas, was renewed Congressional funding for the Contras.<sup>22</sup> Certainly not all of the Contra supporters got behind the peace plan. Representative Duncan Hunter (California) sent out a Dear Colleague letter on 6 August with a recent *Los Angeles Times* article. The article quoted a Russian newspaper that was “remarkably pessimistic” about the sorry state of Nicaragua’s struggle with the Contras, not to mention its failing economy. Representative Hunter believed the article illustrated the fact that, “the Freedom Fighters are effective and must be supported. If they are not, the only winner will be the Soviet Union.”<sup>23</sup> Bulk letters and illustrative articles in the *Washington Times* notwithstanding, public support for the Contras remained low. Between 2 August and 5 August support for aiding the Contras dipped to 36 percent. 59 percent opposed Congress giving aid.<sup>24</sup>

Before the two sides of the debate could solidify their positions behind Reagan’s peace proposal, an accord was signed by the presidents of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. The plan was general and left much to negotiation but appealed to many Democrats right away. Speaker Wright, who kept in touch with Arias through the deliberations,<sup>25</sup> immediately embraced the plan. Wright also favored

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<sup>22</sup> James Lemoyne, “Sandinistas and Rebels Differ Sharply on Proposal,” *New York Times*, 7 August, 1987.

<sup>23</sup> Hunter, Duncan, Dear Colleague letter, 6 August, 1987. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 62, Nicaragua Internally.

<sup>24</sup> “Poll Indicates Decline In Support for Contras,” *New York Times*, 7 August, 1987.

<sup>25</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 539-543.

the Central American plan because he believed that the critical arrangements and decisions should be made by leaders in Central America.<sup>26</sup> The major provisions of the plan called for easing of political restrictions by the Sandinistas and demanded that all outside aid to guerrilla groups be cut off.<sup>27</sup> Wright's acceptance of the plan was a major setback for Reagan since he controlled which bills reached the floor for a vote. Wright did leave the door open to nonmilitary aid, however. Like many moderates in Congress Wright thought it important to leave the Contras intact while they watched to see if the Sandinistas would indeed carry out the promised democratic improvements.<sup>28</sup> This peace plan, embraced by both Central American Leaders and the opposition in Congress, effectively hemmed in the battered Reagan Administration.<sup>29</sup> When asked by the press Reagan acknowledged that there was little choice but to recognize the plan. The White House admitted that they doubted that Nicaragua would fulfill its promises in the plan, but pledged to be active diplomatically through the process in order to address shortcomings in the pact.<sup>30</sup> While the White House appeared resigned to going along with the plan, Republican presidential hopefuls and commentators on the right were enraged at

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Allen, "New Central American Peace Plan Undercuts Rebels, U.S. Proposal," *Wall Street Journal*, 10 August 1987.

<sup>27</sup> James Lemoyne, "Five Central American Presidents Agree On a Tentative Peace Plan," *New York Times*, 8 August 1987.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Engelberg, "House Speaker Warmly Embraces the Latin Plan," *New York Times*, 8 August 1987.

<sup>29</sup> Joel Brinkley, "Pressing For Peace; A Central American Initiative." *New York Times*, 9 August 1987.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Engelberg, "Reagan Supports Peace Agreement by 5 Latin Leaders." *New York Times*, 9 August 1987.

the apparent abandoning of the Contras. Vice President Bush said that the United States would not abandon the Contras, and noted that the agreement favored the Sandinistas. Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole (Kansas) rejected Wright's suggestion that the Reagan administration wait before submitting another Contra funding request, stating, "If it's not needed, we can always put it back in the Treasury. Let Congress go ahead and have the money ready in the event this falls through."<sup>31</sup> *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial page called it, "Reagan's Bay of Pigs," and predicted that Nicaragua would become a permanent Soviet satellite. The article criticized the treaty for not insisting that the Soviets withdraw military support and noted tersely that the verification commission would not even meet until December, "well past the expiration of Contra funding."<sup>32</sup>

Congress took an August recess soon after the announcement of the peace plan. Members of the Nicaragua Task force believed the peace plan to be the alternative plan they had hoped for and therefore continued to vigilantly monitor media outlets in shifts. The members observed CBS, NBC, ABC, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Times*. When monitors observed developments they reported back to the Democratic Leadership so they could

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<sup>31</sup> Lawrence, Mark, "Wright Urges Support For Regional Peace Pact: Bush Says Agreement Favors Sandinistas," *Washington Post*, 10 August 1987.

<sup>32</sup> "Reagan's Bay of Pigs," *Wall Street Journal*, 11 August 1987. The *Washington Times* called the peace proposal a "trap," and printed an article by Wesley Pruden that included the quote, "It's sad. And it's what happens when a man is elected president of the United States and decides he had rather be Mother Teresa." "A Quick Verdict on Mr. Reagan," 12 August 1987.

determine how best to respond.<sup>33</sup> Fearing the loss of the Contras, conservative NGOs decided to take the offensive. The National Conservative Foundation produced an ad campaign that warned against Soviet aggression and suggested that if the United States did not support the anti-Sandinista movement, they might face a communist threat on the United States' border. The group planned to spend \$1.3 million on the effort, but found matters complicated. They believed passionately in the Contra cause but were unsure on how to deal with Reagan's peace plan offer, since one of the organization's goals was to create support for the President's policies.<sup>34</sup>

Reagan's speech on 14 August only mentioned Nicaragua in the broadest terms possible. Regarding his recent initiative concerning Nicaragua he said, "Our key point was that the Communist regime in Nicaragua should do what it formally pledged to do in 1979 - respect the Nicaraguan people's basic rights of free speech, free press, free elections and religious liberty." Most of the speech was devoted to commenting on the recently finished Iran-Contra congressional hearings.<sup>35</sup> A last minute insertion into the speech was also telling: Reagan stated, "We have always been willing to talk – we have never been willing to abandon those who are fighting for democracy and freedom." This insertion sent a message that the White House was not walking away from the Contras. This also gave the White House room to maneuver and sent a message that they were not

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<sup>33</sup> Observation Team to Monitor Progress on the Central American Peace Plan, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 62/Peace Plan.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Rosenthal, "Conservatives Try a TV Hard Sell for Contras." *New York Times*, 11 August 1987.

<sup>35</sup> "Transcript of Reagan Address on Foreign and Domestic Issues," *New York Times*, 13 August 1987.

completely at ease with all of the provisions in the Central America Peace Plan. The Reagan administration was also clear that they still planned to ask Congress for more aid for the Contras in order to keep them viable until the November 7<sup>th</sup> deadline envisioned by the Costa Rica peace plan.<sup>36</sup> A senior official told the press that the White House intended to continue to support the Contras as a way to ensure democratization of Nicaragua.<sup>37</sup>

The Sandinistas responded to the peace plan by offering to restore full press freedom if the United States would stop supporting the Nicaraguan rebels. The Vice President, Sergio Ramirez Mercado, promised that “Full constitutional freedoms will be restored, *La Prensa* will reopen, the Catholic radio station will reopen, there will be no prior censorship of the press, there will be no restrictions on political party activity, the people’s tribunals will be closed and all counterrevolutionary prisoners will be freed.” President Ortega also took time to meet with one of his critics, Cardinal Obando y Bravo,<sup>38</sup> to ask for a process of selecting a bishop to serve on the National Reconciliation Commission. This commission was to oversee the country’s compliance with the peace accord.<sup>39</sup> Cardinal Obando y Bravo had emerged in 1985 as a central anti-Sandinista

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<sup>36</sup> Roberts, Steven V, “Reagan Planning To Seek More Aid For The Contras,” *New York Times*, 14 August 1987.

<sup>37</sup> Lou Cannon, “Latin Peace is Priority for Reagan,” *Washington Post*, 14 August 1987.

<sup>38</sup> Catholics were divided on the issue, however, the differences are nuanced rather than contradictory. Cardinal Obando y Bravo opposed the Sandinistas because of their atheism, the Maryknoll nuns oppose the Contras because of the collateral damage caused by the conflict.

<sup>39</sup> Kinser, Stephen, “Nicaragua Warns U.S. on Contra Aid,” *New York Times*, 14 August 1987.

figure and therefore a key Reagan administration ally. The Sandinista's communist ideology helped fuel his opposition, as well as the unpopular military draft and reported Sandinista human rights abuses. Together with opposition newspaper *La Prensa*, the Catholic Church had been a reliable vehicle for anti-Sandinista rhetorical ammunition for Republicans giving speeches in Washington.<sup>40</sup> Obando y Bravo was therefore a credible witness, and it was foreseeable that if Ortega could convince him, he would go a long way toward placating his critics.

By fall 1987 it was clear that there was a viable alternative policy on the table. The Iran-Contra scandal turned out to be a remarkable political catalyst. By lowering Reagan's popularity the scandal created a power vacuum in the arena of Central America policy. Reagan tried to seize the political initiative by offering an unacceptable peace to the Sandinistas, hoping that their refusal would provide justification for continued aid to the Contras. However, the bipartisan peace plan that he forged with Speaker Wright did not have its intended consequence. Sensing that Washington was serious about peace, the presidents of the five Central American nations were able for the first time to put together a comprehensive plan of their own.<sup>41</sup> The plan was immediately accepted by President Reagan's opponents in Washington, and provided the opposition with the alternative policy and political cover they had been looking for. Stumbling and weakened, the

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<sup>40</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 411. *Time* Magazine noted on 28 October 1985 that Ortega had declared the suspension of nearly all civil liberties in Nicaragua. They also noted that Ortega's upcoming trip to Washington would be a vehicle for trying to explain why this draconian step was necessary. Edward W. Desmond. *Nicaragua Enemies Within: Civil liberties are suspended*.

<sup>41</sup> Joel Brinkley, "Reagan Latin Plan: Hole Gets Deeper." *New York Times*, 15 August 1987.

Reagan administration decided to try and wait out the storm. They hoped that if they waited until October to ask for more Contra funding, the Sandinistas might provide justification for more funding. In the meantime they began to frame funding requests in such a way that the Contras were now an insurance policy for the now popular peace process.

## CHAPTER 6

### AFTER THE PEACE PROCESS

Reagan's new strategy to use the controversial Contras as a insurance policy for the popular peace process featured prominently in his weekly radio address on 15 August 1987, "Our support for the freedom fighters should continue until a satisfactory peace plan is in place, a cease-fire has occurred and a verifiable process of democratization is under way.<sup>1</sup>" Verifying a process was a subjective endeavor, however. The first step was to determine what steps or signs would signify "verifiable democratization." Hoping to lead the way on this critical issue the foreign ministers of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica (and a lower level official from Honduras) met to discuss next steps. These officials hoped to meet to discuss implementing the peace plan as well as to form an international commission to monitor the plan.<sup>2</sup> However, during the initial wrangling over the details there was the sense that neither the Sandinistas nor the United States expected the other to honor the agreement. The evidence of distrust was plentiful. In order to test the will of the Sandinistas, the United States backed opposition in Nicaragua started organizing protests and feigned surprise that they were treated harshly. The Sandinistas shared the cynicism of the United States. Sources close to the Sandinistas stated publicly that "it seems very unlikely that the Americans will actually cut off the

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen V. Roberts, "Reagan Favors Contra Aid Until After Cease-Fire," *New York Times*, 16 August 1987.

<sup>2</sup> James Lemoyne, "Ministers Discuss Latin Peace Plan," *New York Times*, 20 August 1987.

Contras, which means the agreement will probably fall apart.”<sup>3</sup> The White House spokesman, Marlin Fitzwater, stated openly, “Make no mistake about it, we want to demonstrate to conservative leaders and to the directorate and to the nation that the President will not desert the Contras.”

As the distrust between the two sides came to the surface, polling data seemed to show that Reagan had little room to maneuver. A *New York Times/CBS News* Poll showed that public support for the Contras was very low. Only thirty-three percent of the 1,480 adults polled said they approved of such aid, while 49 percent said they disapproved. Conservatives continued to cling to the idea of Contra aid bolstered by their base and the perceived rightness of the Contra cause. Presidential hopefuls George Bush and Bob Dole sparred over the issue on the campaign trail and Jack Kemp took things one step further by going to Central America with a group of over 50 conservative leaders to show that he would not back down in the face of public opinion polls. His stock went up with the conservative leaders on the trip and seemed to think a tough stance against the Sandinistas would help him with key constituents in a presidential race.<sup>4</sup>

The Senate took an unusual step in early September right before the summer recess. They created the Central American Negotiations Observer Group. This powerless bipartisan panel led by Connecticut Democrat Senator Christopher Dodd was set up to

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Kinzer, “Nicaraguans Call for More Protests,” *New York Times*, 21 August 1987.

<sup>4</sup> “Contra Support in U.S. Falls to Pre-North Rate,” *New York Times*, 26 August 1987. Clifford May, “Kemp Gains Favor in His Latin Visit,” *New York Times*, 13 September 1987.

monitor the talks aimed at forging a peace pact for Central America. It was unique in that it created a bipartisan panel to monitor negotiations in which the United States was not itself a participant. Perhaps as much a product of Iran-Contra as innovative diplomacy Dodd noted that they would be observing the “Administration’s maneuvers as much as the negotiations themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

International politics also helped break ground for peace. By late August 1987 the fragile Sandinista economy felt the pinch of the Soviet curtailment of oil announced in May. Sensing that they were an overall political liability, the Soviet Union seemed willing to let the Sandinistas wither.<sup>6</sup> As Soviet enthusiasm for the Sandinistas waned, Republican leaders lobbied for increased funds. Congressman and presidential hopeful Jack Kemp visited Honduras for the purpose of criticizing the Central America peace plan as “fundamentally flawed,” and called for continued aid to the Contras.<sup>7</sup> On 10 September, in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary of State George Shultz detailed the administration’s plan for new aid to the Contras. The Reagan administration proposed \$270 million in new aid in order to press the Sandinistas to keep to their agreement. According to Mr. Shultz, funding the Contras would “send a message that the United States is in this to stay.” Congressional Democrats opposed the timing and the request in general. Some believed that requests should be postponed at

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<sup>5</sup> Clifford May, “Washington Talk: The Senate; One for the Americas’ History Books.” *New York Times*, 2 September 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Tad Szulc, “A Gorbachev Signal on Nicaragua,” *New York Times*, 6 September 1987. The Sandinista revolution was not seen as a success, and certainly was less important than the mutual removal of intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe and Asia.

<sup>7</sup> Clifford May, “Kemp, in Honduras, Assails Latin Peace Plan,” *New York Times*, 9 September 1987.

least until after 7 November, and others thought it was detrimental to the overall peace process.<sup>8</sup> On 12 September in an interview with *U.S. News and World Report*, President Reagan expressed fears that the Central America peace plan was fatally flawed. He also expressed continued support for the Contras in his weekly radio address.<sup>9</sup>

To the dismay of the NGOs and their allies in Congress, Contra funding continued. Even after the scandal of Iran-Contra and the historic nature of the proposed peace agreement, Speaker Wright was not willing to cut the Contras off. The historical memory of “losing” Cuba and China to communism remained a very real Cold War fear. In order to provide political cover the Democratic and Republican leaders worked out a temporary agreement on 16 September to keep the Contras in the field until it could be seen whether or not the Sandinistas would keep their end of the agreement. Led by Speaker Wright and Republican Representative Robert H. Michel of Illinois, Congress hoped to approve nonmilitary aid for the rebels for 40 days beginning October 1. In contrast to the administration’s increase in funding, the House plan kept aid at 1987 levels and restricted aid to nonmilitary purposes.<sup>10</sup> Anti-Contra activists were incensed, but the majority of lawmakers were afraid that Ortega would embarrass them again, and therefore saw humanitarian funding for the Contras as an insurance policy of their own.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Neil A. Lewis, “New Contra Plan Called a Threat to Latin Accord,” *New York Times*, 11 September, 1987.

<sup>9</sup> Neil A. Lewis, “Reagan Sees Fatal Flaws in Central America Pact,” *New York Times*, 13 September 1987.

<sup>10</sup> Neil A. Lewis, “House Chiefs Reach Tentative Accord on Contras,” *New York Times*, 17 September 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 548.

By mid September the military situation had worsened for the Sandinistas. The *New York Times* reported on 13 September that the Contras seemed to have gained a foothold in central Nicaragua. This long-time Contra goal, to have a semi-permanent base in central Nicaragua where they could move freely, showed the growing popularity of the Contras and presented further difficulties for the Sandinistas.<sup>12</sup>

In the midst of domestic political stalemate and a fluid military situation in Nicaragua, NGOs like the National Defense Council flew Congressional Delegations down to see conditions in Nicaragua. Unlike the normal “codel,”<sup>13</sup> the National Defense Council did more than show delegates welcoming politicians and smiling children. In order to present an authentic experience they took them out to the outback, to civilian hospitals, and refugee camps. The question remained, however, whether or not this type of effort by NGOs would have any long term impact. Long-timers familiar with the practice stated, “I know of almost no one who ever went on a codel and came back with his opinions changed. But I still think it’s better to go than not to go. There’s something you get from being there that you just can’t get from newspapers and television alone.” The point of the trip for some was added credibility at home. Senator Dodd noted that the trip enabled one to be able to tell their constituents what they told Daniel Ortega while in Nicaragua. Theodore Sorenson, member of the Koch delegation<sup>14</sup> to Central America, expressed that it was difficult to find any facts in Central America. He believed that it

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *Contras are Reported to Establish a Foothold in Central Nicaragua*, *New York Times*, 13 September 1987.

<sup>13</sup> Washington shorthand for Congressional delegation.

<sup>14</sup> A nine-member delegation headed by Mayor Edward “Ed” Koch of New York City.

was easy to confirm preconceived conclusions, but there was little objective truth. He sarcastically explained that, “Had we accepted at face value all the assurances given us by local governmental and military leaders, we would believe that Honduras has no Contra bases, El Salvador has no death squads, Nicaragua has no program to covert aid to Salvadoran rebels and Guatemala has no problems with civilian control.” He came home relatively disillusioned, but concluded that the United States had a new chance to write a better chapter in its dealings with Central America if it helped enforce compliance with the Arias peace plan.<sup>15</sup>

Events continued to unfold as the United States carefully watched to see how Nicaragua would comply with the peace accord. On 18 September the Contras released 80 prisoners to show support for the Central American peace accord.<sup>16</sup> On 20 September the Sandinista Government gave *La Prensa* permission to resume publication free of censorship. These signs of democratization were encouraging signs that Nicaragua was serious about the peace accord. These steps also took place well before the agreed upon 7 November date. President Daniel Ortega met with publisher Violeta Barrios de Chamorro and discussed the terms of lifting restrictions on the newspaper. Mrs. Chamorro rejected any form of censorship and firmly refuted any suggestion that the newspaper would be a

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<sup>15</sup> Clifford D. May, “Washington Talk: Politicians Abroad; You Haven’t Been Anywhere if Not to Managua.” *New York Times*, 14 September 1987. “Lessons of the Koch Mission,” *New York Times*, 13 November 1987.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Kinzer, “Contras Release 80 Prisoners in Move Backing Peace Plan.” *New York Times*, 19 September, 1987.

tool of the CIA.<sup>17</sup> Holding to their pattern of skepticism about the communist Sandinistas, the Reagan administration labeled the moves “cosmetic,” and pointed out areas where the Nicaraguan government was only partially fulfilling the Guatemala accords. As the rhetorical struggle in the United States continued, the Contras kept up their raids in the Nicaraguan countryside. Witness for Peace reported on 24 September that the Contras had killed at least 84 civilians in fighting at state-supported farm cooperatives between February and July. The report was part of Witness for Peace’s effort to systematically document every significant armed conflict in Nicaragua. Despite these tragedies, signs of progress appeared in different places. The border between Nicaragua and Honduras reopened, allowing thousands of people to reunite with their families. The Miskito Indians, located on the east coast and on the rivers of northern Nicaragua, stated their desire for a cease-fire. They had been a non-controversial, if disunified, opponent of the Sandinistas and had been supported by the Reagan administration through the CIA. Adding to the return to normalcy was the appearance of *La Prensa* on the streets of Managua. The paper immediately declared its opposition to the Sandinistas and asserted that Nicaraguans had never wanted a totalitarian government. This dramatic move indicated progress to key opposition leaders although they said that more steps would have to be made before there was true freedom of the press.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Kinzer, “Nicaragua Lifts Restrictions From Opposition Newspaper.” *New York Times*, 21 September, 1987, and “Managua’s Bid to Censor is Reported,” *New York Times*, 22 September 1987.

<sup>18</sup> Steven Kinser, “Anti-Sandinista Paper Reopens, Defiant and Exultant. *New York Times*, 2 October, 1987.

The freedom of the press was noted in the 6 October report of the “Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus,” chaired by moderate Republican Senator Mark Hatfield. The report expressed optimism about the peace process, noting progress in the key provisions of the cease-fire.<sup>19</sup> Despite these promising signs the Reagan Administration refused to rule out a request for Contra aid. They simply did not believe that the Sandinistas’ compliance with some provisions of the Guatemala accords proved that they were a genuine democracy. Leaders in the House were satisfied: however, Representative Bonior noted that, “If the Sandinistas comply with the Guatemala plan, my vote count tells me that Contra aid is over, and the numbers are getting better every day.” Confident, but not complacent, anti-Contra Members and their allies continued to circulate evidence collected by NGOs on the ground in Nicaragua. On 6 October Representative Lane Evans (Illinois) sent a Dear Colleague letter with an attached Witness for Peace report documenting 350 civilian victims. Evans pleaded, “These incidents, a fraction of those which came to the attention of Witness for Peace during that six month period, help explain why two-thirds of the American people oppose this war.”<sup>20</sup> Senator Dodd kept on the offensive in the major media pointing out that the Administration continued to be less

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Hatfield, Chairman, “Progress Toward Peace in Central America: Two Months Down, One to Go,” Report from the Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 62.

<sup>20</sup> Lane Evans, Dear Colleague Letter, 6 October 1987. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

than sincere with its objections and was merely adding conditions to assure that the Sandinistas did not comply.<sup>21</sup>

Unconvinced by Sandinista concessions, Reagan pressed on. In a speech to the Organization of American States, Reagan documented the list of broken pledges by the Sandinistas. He also asked the gathered leaders,

How can you have democracy, when thousands are imprisoned for political reasons. How can you have a democracy, when individuals who displease the Sandinistas are punished by withholding the ration cards that allow them to buy food and other necessities. How can you have democracy with a secret police force, commanded by dedicated Leninists, that keeps tabs on every citizen through the so-called "block committees." How can you have democracy, when the entire society is being militarized, with the military under the control of one political party and its Cuban and Soviet "advisers." [sic]

Reagan also claimed that the recent democratic progress had been forced on the Sandinistas by the determined "freedom fighters." Reagan vowed not to walk away from his commitment to the freedom fighters and therefore remained determined to press on for \$270 million in renewed aid for the Contras. He pledged that the United States would support the Contras until genuine democratic reforms had taken place: only then would United States assistance money be redirected to strengthening the democratic forces inside Nicaragua.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The significant demands of the Regan administration were as follows: Negotiate a cease-fire directly with the Contras. Free all political prisoners. Disband the neighborhood committees (modeled after a party system in Cuba). Reduce the size and power of the military so it is in proportion with the militaries of Nicaragua's neighbors. Joel Brinkley, "White House Sets a List of Demands for Nicaraguans," *New York Times*, 4 October, 1987.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Reagan on Contras: 'Strive and Struggle'" *New York Times*, 8 October 1987.

Supporting the Contras needed House approval, however. Speaker Wright plainly stated that a vote on new military aid would not pass the House, and the Reagan administration did not publically dispute that assessment. It didn't help matters that the most influential foreign opponent to further Contra aid was gaining international acclaim. On 13 October, President Oscar Arias Sanches of Costa Rica was awarded the Nobel Peace prize. The Norwegian Nobel Committee applauded President Arias for his work in Central America toward ending the conflict in the region. Like other NGOs invested in ending the destructive conflict, the Prize committee admitted its effort to not only recognize peacemakers, but to contribute to the peace itself. Egil Aarvik, chairman of the Nobel Committee, stated, "We in the committee do not operate in a vacuum. We saw that the Central American problem has been in focus over the last months and the past year. I think it is important that the Peace Prize can be given to a person who is currently active, that the prize can have an influence." Noting the symbolism of the award, Speaker Wright believed this further doomed military aid for the Contras. Republicans were not daunted, however, and Secretary of State Shultz maintained that the Reagan administration intended to press on for the funding.<sup>23</sup> Joining the chorus against aid, President Jose Napoleon Duarte of El Salvador expressed his desire to see the peace plan succeed and stated that he thought no new military aid should be given to the Contras

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<sup>23</sup> Neil A. Lewis, "Wright Says Award for Arias Dooms Aid for Contras," *New York Times*, 14 October 1987. Serge Schmemann, "Costa Rica Leader Wins Nobel Prize for Peace Plan," *New York Times*, 14 October 1987.

until at least January 1988.<sup>24</sup> On 22 October Honduran President Jose Azcona Hoyo, the Reagan administration's closest supporter in Central America, joined Duarte in calling for the suspension of aid until January of 1988. His comments included expectations that the Sandinistas would likely fail to comply with the Central America peace accord, but believed that the peace process should have a chance to succeed.<sup>25</sup> The Reagan administration relented. Under pressure from Congress and the presidents of Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Honduras the White House decided on 29 October to delay a request for Contra aid until January 1988.<sup>26</sup>

8 November, House Speaker Jim Wright turned down a request from Nicaraguan officials to serve as an intermediary between the Sandinistas and the Contras. The Sandinistas wanted someone besides Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, a longtime enemy of their regime, to help with negotiations. Obando had softened his rhetoric and stated, "I don't consider myself anyone's enemy."<sup>27</sup> His connection with the Contras and his international prestige gave him considerable leverage in the peace process. However Wright did meet with Ortega to discuss a 15-point cease-fire proposal. This discussion, in addition to information flooding congress from concerned NGOs, convinced Mr. Wright

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<sup>24</sup> Neil Lewis, "Duarte Seems to Back Contra Aid Halt," *New York Times*, 16 October, 1987. Duarte later softened his comments and stated that he did not intend to tell the Reagan Administration what to do. He did not however retract his comments.

<sup>25</sup> Neil Lewis, "Honduran Urging Halt in Contra Aid," *New York Times*, 22 October 1987. Hoyo may have felt pressured by both the Reagan Administration and the peace accord that he signed. He hoped that the vote on Contra aid would be delayed until 7 January. He also stated that it was imperative to keep pressure on the Sandinistas.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Kinzer, "Nicaragua Hints at Truce Talks," *New York Times*, 31 October 1987.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Kinzer, "Obando as Peacemaker: A Stormy Path," *New York Times*, 10 November 1987.

that the Nicaraguan Government intended to comply with the Central American peace plan.<sup>28</sup> This meeting was part of a larger pattern. After the Iran-Contra scandal the Congress increasingly took initiative in brokering peace in Central America. It invited foreign heads of state to address groups and it met with leaders that were purposely shunned by the state department, and inserted itself into negotiations. This made it difficult for the Reagan administration to conduct foreign policy. This fact was not lost on the Sandinistas who began to see Congress as a parallel power, and took suggestions from Democrat leaders in Congress very seriously.<sup>29</sup> This increase in international prestige for Congress also gave more power and influence to the NGOs who informed and influenced key members of Congress.

NGOs on the ground in Nicaragua kept working for peace in every possible way. Some priests worked to urge the Contras to surrender and seek amnesty under the Central American peace plan. The *New York Times* provided a specific example, writing about the Rev. Enrique Oggier, who was unsuccessfully trying to encourage Contras to take advantage of the amnesty plan. He believed that it was the best hope for peace in Nicaragua.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Neil Lewis, "Wright Has Talks With Both Parties in Nicaragua War," *New York Times*, 13 November 1987.

<sup>29</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 549-550. The Sandinista crackdown on 15 August 1987 was perhaps the best example of this influence. Liberals in the House told the Sandinistas sharply that this type of response to protests would likely lead to continued Contra aid, and forced the Sandinistas to reconsider their responses. Kagan suggests that this sharp response from Washington led to the Sandinistas appointing Cardinal Obando to the national reconciliation commission which was a key concession.

<sup>30</sup> Neil Lewis, "Priest's Mission is Contras' Surrender," *New York Times*, 13 November 1987.

While priests were urging the Contras to surrender, Ortega continued to work diplomatically with the United States Congress. He believed that his best chance for winning the conflict was persuading Democrats in Congress that the Contras should not be supported by the United States. Aided by talks with Speaker Wright, Ortega attempted to isolate Reagan politically.<sup>31</sup> The talks encouraged Obando who speculated that the formal cease-fire negotiations would take place between the Sandinistas and Contras before 5 December. Reagan was not impressed with the proposal and noted that the Sandinistas continued to repress their people.<sup>32</sup> The obvious diplomatic maneuvering by the Sandinistas provoked Reagan to complain that Wright was creating confusion by involving himself in negotiations. Indeed Wright agreed that he and the president did not, and would likely never agree on Central American policy, but insisted that his role in negotiations was constitutional. The dispute was serious enough to necessitate a meeting between Wright and the Reagan administration. After the meeting with Secretary of State Shultz, Wright agreed to work with the administration toward common goals of peace in Central America.<sup>33</sup> Despite the “peace agreement” between Speaker Wright and the

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<sup>31</sup> Neil Lewis, “Peace Salvo; Sandinistas Launch and Offensive on Capitol Hill,” *New York Times*, 15 November 1987.

<sup>32</sup> George Volsky, “Managua Cardinal Sees Talks Within 3 Weeks,” *New York Times*, 15 November 1987. Joel Brinkly, “Reagan is Skeptical on Peace Effort by Sandinistas,” *New York Times*, 15 November 1987. James Lemoyne, “Honduras Said To Re-Evaluate Help for Contras,” *New York Times*, 15 November 1987.

<sup>33</sup> Steven Roberts, “Reagan-Wright Argument Grows on Central America Policy Role,” *New York Times*, 17 November 1987. Joel Brinkley, “Wright, His Latin Role Contested, Signs a ‘Peace’ Pact with Shultz,” *New York Times*, 18 November 1987. Wright and Shultz agreed to six key points. 1. They want the accord signed by five Central American Presidents in August “to succeed in bringing peace and freedom and democracy to Central America.” 2. Negotiations toward that end “should be concentrated in Central

administration, Ortega believed that his trip had been a success. He was now more confident than ever that the Sandinistas could go over President Reagan's head to the United States Congress and convince them to vote for an end to Contra aid.<sup>34</sup>

Through the process NGOs made their voices heard. The American public who paid attention to the ongoing war could not help but see the needless waste of lives and treasure. America's Watch kept the information rolling to anti-Contra members of Congress, concerned citizens, and major press outlets. Their report on 5 November detailed human rights abuses in Nicaragua by both the government and the rebels. Their report influenced both writers of news stories and prompted citizens to write scathing letters to the editor. One reader even protested the photography in the *New York Times*, incensed that they would show a picture of a Contra "petting a child."<sup>35</sup>

Amnesty International was not the only NGO providing information to concerned citizens. The Lawyers Committee for Human Rights also released a news-worthy report in November based on a committee's findings during a recent trip to the region. It noted that both the government and the Contras continued to abuse civilians. The report

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America and continue to be guided primarily by Central Americans." 3. The role of Miguel Cardinal Obando y Bravo, the Nicaraguan Roman Catholic Primate, as the cease-fire mediator between the Contras and the Sandinistas should be "strongly encouraged." 4. The United States will be willing to meet with the Sandinistas along with other leaders from the region once "the Cardinal's efforts lead to serious negotiations." 5. The United States has "vital interests" in the results of peace negotiations. 6. "Neither of us want to create unnecessary problems. We want to work together to bring about solutions."

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Kinzer, "Ortega vs. Contra Aid: Sandinistas Near a Victory?" *New York Times*, 18 November 1987.

<sup>35</sup> Nina Eliasoph, *Image and Reality of Contras' Character*, letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, 6 November 1987.

claimed that the Sandinista government used death threats and psychological coercion to elicit confessions. The report also found the Contras responsible for the “disappearance, abduction and murder of civilians.”<sup>36</sup>

Joining the loud chorus of religious NGOs against Contra aid, the Roman Catholic Church threw its weight behind Cardinal Obando y Bravo’s mediation efforts on 19 November. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops encouraged the Reagan administration to, “turn our energies and resources in the region from supplying weapons of war to building instruments of peace.” Auxiliary Bishop Joseph M. Sullivan of Brooklyn overtly admitted that he hoped that his statement would influence United States Presidential candidates on Central American policy, adding that there were 52 million Roman Catholics in the United States. This foreign policy statement was not out of character for the bishops as they argued against the buildup of nuclear arsenals in 1983 and called for a realignment of the United States economy to help the poor in 1986.<sup>37</sup> NGO Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) continued to issue reports on the recent developments in Central America. The report highlighted the progress that was being made in Nicaragua, using exact numbers of political prisoners freed and proposals made by the Sandinistas regarding elections in 1988. The report applauded efforts by the House of Representatives to let the peace plan work before allowing more Contra

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<sup>36</sup> Nina Eliasoph, “Letter to the Editor,” *New York Times*, 18 November 1987. Michael Freitag, “Sandinistas and Contras Accused of Rights Abuses,” *New York Times*, 18 November 1987.

<sup>37</sup> Ari L. Goldman, “U.S. Catholic Bishops Set Policy Backing Central American Talks,” *New York Times*, 20 November 1987.

funding. The report gave the impression that concrete steps toward peace were being taken and that Congress deserved much of the credit.<sup>38</sup>

The Reagan administration, knowing the opposition to new military funding to the Contras, continued to test the water for further non-lethal aid. Lieutenant General Colin L. Powell, the national security advisor, met with key Democratic swing voters to assess their reaction to \$30 million in new funding that included helicopters and military training.<sup>39</sup>

By all observable indicators the peace process initiated by the five Central American presidents had given the political momentum to the anti-Contra aid forces. Those opposed to Contra aid had long worked for a viable alternative and the peace plan appeared to be acceptable to enough members of Congress to fight off Reagan's requests for more aid. However, the vote counters in the House knew that even with momentum on their side the vote in early 1988 would turn on key swing votes. The systematic political pressure put on those key members of Congress is the subject for the next chapter.

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<sup>38</sup> Peace Plan Monitor: Recent Developments in Central America, 22 November 1987, Issue No. 4, Published by Washington Office On Latin America, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 62/Peace Plan.

<sup>39</sup> Neil A. Lewis, "Reagan Aides Seek Way For Congress to Help Contras," *New York Times*, 29 November 1987. Important Democratic swing votes on the issue included Ike Skelton of Missouri, John M. Spratt Jr. of South Carolina, Dave McCurdy of Oklahoma, and Glenn English of Ohio.

## CHAPTER 7

### COUNTDOWN 87

As opposing politicians wrangled over the definition of terms and key issues concerning Contra aid in the national media, the coalition of NGOs, politicians, and private citizens against Contra aid launched their most ambitious and strategic program to date.

Countdown '87's leadership reflected the diversity of the movement. Representative George Miller (Democrat from the 7<sup>th</sup> district in California) chaired the effort. The former chief of staff to Senator Christopher Dodd (CT), Rosa DeLauro was chosen to be Executive Director. The oversight board included Representative David Bonior (Democrat from the twelfth district in Michigan) as well as four NGOs. The steering committee mixed NGOs of various types including labor organizations, churches, and grassroots organizers.<sup>1</sup>

The leaders of the effort anticipated the key vote to take place in 1987 and therefore named it Countdown '87. Unlike previous efforts that fell short because of their

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<sup>1</sup> Countdown '87, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66/Countdown. The leadership structure under George Miller and Rosa DeLauro was as follows - The Oversight board: Robert Borosage, Institute for Policy Studies; Dr Charles Clements, U.U.S.C.; Cathy Gille; Rep David Bonior; David Reed, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy; Rev. Robert Stark, PACCA; Marge Tabankin, ARCA foundation. The Steering Committee: Citizen Action, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, National Labor Committee, Neighbor to Neighbor Network, Nicaragua Network, Pax Americas, PAACA, Presbyterian Church USA, SANE/Freeze, United Church of Christ. Field Organizing Committee: Citizen Action, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, National Labor Committee, Neighbor to Neighbor Network, Nicaragua Network, Pax Americas, PAACA, Presbyterian Church USA, SANE/Freeze, Witness for Peace.

underfunded strategies and poor executions, Countdown '87 promised to mobilize one hundred professional organizers to launch a “sophisticated organizing, media campaign against Contra aid to include polling, TV spots, targeted grassroots work, a million dollar campaign.”<sup>2</sup> While the initial media splash was slight,<sup>3</sup> the organizational skill and diversity of the participants of the campaign were impressive. Notable in their efforts was the way the coalition attempted to apply what they had learned from the April Mobilization.

The suggestions following the April Mobilization were as follows:

1. Reach an explicit agreement about the relative importance and balance between the dual goals of changing policy and building the movement.
2. Develop a comprehensive strategy and tactics to influence policy makers.
3. Develop a professional strategy to maximize the media exposure of any coalition's politics, as well as the debates and controversies generated by its efforts.
4. Address squarely the issue of racism in the movement and develop a conscious plan to desegregate the movement and assure the central participation of Afro-American, Latin, and other communities of color.
5. Develop a strategy to respond to red-baiting.
6. Determine the appropriate character of the coalition in terms of membership and leadership.<sup>4</sup>

The April Mobilization had split its efforts between growing the movement and changing policy. In contrast, the coalition leading Countdown '87 recognized that the movement had reached critical mass and therefore devoted its efforts to changing United

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<sup>2</sup> Press Briefing: Countdown '87, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66/Countdown.

<sup>3</sup> Rosenthal, Andrew, “Campaign Formed Opposing Contras,” *New York Times*, 14 August 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Beverly Bickel, Philip Brenner, and William LeoGrande, *Challenging the Reagan Doctrine: A summation of the April 25th mobilization*, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University. Box 66.

States foreign policy. This focus took for granted the influence of swing voters, and therefore the coalition developed a comprehensive strategy to influence key policy makers. Rosa DeLauro, executive director of Countdown '87, stated:

At present, we believe that there are about 80 Congressman and Senators whose minds are potentially open on this question and who would like to hear from their constituents. About 15 percent of those elected officials are in the West, 20 percent in the East, 30 percent in the South and 50 percent in the Midwest. We are preparing to organize and offer media in around 30 of those congressional districts and states.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, DeLauro stated, "The American people oppose the war in Nicaragua and aid to the Contra rebels...The American people have wanted to cut off this funding every time it was proposed, and they want to cut it off now."<sup>6</sup> The genius of Countdown '87 was the mobilization of that consistent public opposition to Contra aid in such a way that, unlike the April Mobilization, the members of Congress could not ignore it.

From the first press release onward Countdown '87 planned to guard its reputation by defining its image. First it assembled an impressive non-traditional activist coalition. In the initial press release Countdown '87 mentioned the United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church USA, Neighbor to Neighbor, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, Citizen Action, Witness for Peace, Catholic Social Justice (Network), Nicaraguan Network, the National Labor Committee, Sane/Freeze, and Quixote Center. It also strove to define itself as democratic and avoid the lethal charge of communist sympathy that had derailed previous activist peace efforts.

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<sup>5</sup> Press Briefing: Countdown '87, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66/Countdown.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

An early indication that the Reagan administration was concerned about some of the groups involved in Countdown '87 was the long face to face meeting with President Reagan and vocal critics from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Eight members of a church task force responsible for drafting a forty-one page position paper met with President Reagan and Vice President Bush to discuss persecution in Nicaragua. The position paper disputed the administration's claims that there was religious persecution in Nicaragua. Rev. Gary Demarest, spokesman for the group, had recently been in Nicaragua, working on a building project sponsored by Habitat for Humanity. While in Nicaragua he was consistently told by Nicaraguans to bring home the message, "Please stop the war," and saw considerable religious freedom. The Reagan administration told the church members that they had been deceived by the Sandinistas and that the administration had been speaking of official censorship of media operations of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church. Neither side seemed to change their mind because of the meeting, but clearly the Reagan administration was trying to reach out to NGOs that opposed its policies in Central America.<sup>7</sup> That interchange showed one of the advantages that Countdown '87 had over the Reagan administration. While Reagan tried to reach out to members of the anti-Contra Coalition and convince them that the data they had gathered was incorrect, Countdown '87 simply had to take the existing outrage at the conditions in Nicaragua and channel them in such a way to influence a change in United States policy.

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<sup>7</sup> William Bole, "Reagan Discusses Nicaragua with Presbyterian Critics," *Washington Post*, 15 August 1987.

In order to provide skeptical members of Congress reliable data about the level of opposition the leadership of Countdown '87 hired the *Analysis Group* from Connecticut to provide them with solid polling data about opinions regarding Contra aid. First *Analysis Group* reviewed all national survey data on Contra aid. The results, which came out immediately after Colone North's influential testimony in the Iran-Contra hearings, were timely, reminding members of Congress that the increase in public support for the Contras following North's testimony was unlikely to be significant in the overall debate. At that critical juncture the report reminded both the national press and individual members of Congress that the public was consistently and decisively opposed to Contra aid.

In addition to gathering national survey data the *Analysis Group* conducted focus groups in swing districts in Illinois and Oklahoma to test various messages and media aimed at solidifying opposition to Contra aid. The message that resonated the most effectively was the one that emphasized dealing with problems at home rather than spending money on military intervention in Central America. The *Analysis Group* also conducted surveys in 10 swing congressional districts for the purpose of illustrating the effectiveness of the message. These surveys were intended to pressure individual members of congress by showing how unpopular voting to support the Contras was in their district. In addition these surveys were shown to members of the press to further publicize the unpopular nature of Contra aid.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Countdown '87 Research Program, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66/Countdown.

The “Review of Public Attitudes Toward Contra Aid” put out by Countdown ’87 following Colonel North’s testimony was very specific. It noted, and explained, the surge of positive opinions toward Contra aid following his “articulate and emotional arguments on behalf of Contra aid.” However the research indicated that no majority ever formed in support of Reagan’s policies and the increase of popularity was over by 5 August 1987.

Particularly illustrative of the depth of anti-Contra aid opinion was the following:

In early 1987, opposition to Contra aid included every demographic and political subgroup of the population. Democrats, women and minorities were particular virulent opponents, but a majority even of Republicans sending more military aid to the Contras...Further, the public has persisted in opposing aid, even when presented with emotional negatives, like the “Communist” or “Marxist” government in Nicaragua.<sup>9</sup>

The report showed that with the exception of July 1987, immediately following Colonel North’s testimony, no public poll conducted in the last three years had shown less than half of all Americans in opposition to Contra aid.

The report also proposed a strategy on how to best frame the debate. The report showed that the public most often gave financial reasons for opposing Contra aid, which, the report pointed out, was a typical response to foreign aid of any type as military and/or economic aid was traditionally unpopular.<sup>10</sup> The second suggestion for framing the

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<sup>9</sup> Diane Feldman, “The Review of Public Attitudes Toward Contra Aid,” Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66/Countdown.

<sup>10</sup> Countdown ’87 used this research extensively in their efforts to inform the public and pressure swing Members of Congress. An article that shows the effectiveness of this approach appeared in the West Frankfort (Illinois) *Daily American*, “Dixon, Contra aid targeted,” 27 August 1987. The article began with this statement, “The people of Illinois are tired of seeing our tax dollars go to kill people in Central America. We want peace there, not more violence and bloodshed” That quote integrates the financial aspects of the aid, the unpopularity of the aid, and the stalemate-endless bloodshed Vietnam type imagery that the polling data suggested would be the most effective.

debate was to include emotional Vietnam imagery. The response from focus groups indicated that the phrase, “just like Vietnam,” elicited an emotional response even from people too young to remember it. The third way to frame the debate was to link it to “Irangate” or Iran-Contra scandal. Polling data gathered by the *Analysis Group* showed that the American public remained skeptical of the President’s ignorance of the issue and was upset by the apparent deceit by the Reagan administration.

The *Analysis Group* also provided suggestions on what issues to avoid, namely a discussion of whether or not the Sandinistas were truly communist. A majority of the country did fear communism in Central America, but as long as those fears were overshadowed by the domestic economy, the possibility of another Vietnam, and the linkage to the Iran-Contra scandal, Americans would likely continue to oppose Contra aid solidly.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the mass demonstrations in the April Mobilization, which had no unified message or method, Countdown ’87 was armed with specific data and viable ways to frame the debate<sup>12</sup>. In order to get that message out Countdown ’87 distributed substantive articles discussing Contra aid to members of Congress, contacts in the press, and other supporters. They also made a list of materials available to the 1100 grassroots peace organizations around the country.<sup>13</sup> The articles were thorough. One fourteen-page

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<sup>11</sup> Feldman, “Review of Public Attitudes Toward Contra Aid,” 7-9.

<sup>12</sup> The success of the framing of the debate showed up even in conversations with members of Congress that supported Contra aid. Representative Skelton quoted members of his district asking questions about, “Why give them (the Contras) money when we need it here.” Sobel, *Public Opinion and Contra Aid*, 259.

<sup>13</sup> Countdown ’87 materials, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66/Countdown.

issue paper listed 10 talking points against Contra aid. Each talking point was well written and was documented by congressional sources, well known NGOs like Americas Watch, quotes from members of the Reagan administration, and major newspapers. This attempt to educate members of local and national press, members of Congress, and supporters of the movement was important, for foreign policy debates in the United States tended to suffer from ignorance and apathy. What the members of Countdown '87 and others knew was that those who were well educated about the issue tended to be against Contra-aid.<sup>14</sup> Therefore great effort was made to get solid, well-documented information into the public eye, and in the hands of waffling members of Congress. As noted in earlier chapters, NGOs had been working to educate their members and willing politicians for years. Countdown '87 simply adopted this successful approach using the well developed skills of allied NGOs to change United States foreign policy.

Countdown '87 began working in June, and by August was on the ground around the country. Utilizing volunteers and paid organizers from NGOs, including Citizen Action, Witness for Peace, Nicaragua Network, Central America Peace Campaign, Committee for Peace in Central America, and Neighbor to Neighbor, Countdown '87 was able to establish a presence in strategic districts.

As the peace plan put forward by the five Central American presidents gained traction and the Reagan administration was forced to delay the vote Countdown '87 modified its operations in order to sustain its efforts until the vote could be held. Because

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<sup>14</sup> Cynthia J. Arnson, and Phillip Brenner, "The Limits of Lobbying: Interest Groups, Congress, and Aid to the Contras, in *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Controversy over Contra Aid*, Richard Sobel, Editor, (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 1993) 193.

Countdown '87 had paid staff, modern equipment, and adequate funding, it was able to adjust to the changing conditions better than previous coalitions.

In the midst of changing dates and international developments Countdown '87 began its work in the targeted swing districts. The suggested general steps for getting started were all laid out in the campaign materials. The first goal was to get critical personnel and systems in place between 24 July and 9 August. The district organizer would contact established anti-Contra aid groups in the district, or if there were no groups in the district they would contact sympathetic groups that bordered it. Next the organizer would secure office and phone bank space and begin list acquisitions. Then they would write individualized field plans and begin to recruit volunteers for phone banks, tabling, press coordination and other crucial tasks. They would next determine the theme and message of the local campaign. For this important task they had specific polling data and ways to frame the debate suggested by their paid consultants. Their goal for this first period was to write 200 letters, make 100 calls to the legislator, publish 4 letters to the editor, and recruit 6 opinion leaders who will lead delegations and/or participate in an event. Once the first phase was completed the target for their second phase was between 10 August and 16 August, during this time Congress would be in recess, and Countdown '87 planned massive individual calls to the members who would be in their home district. For this time frame they planned 200 letters, 2 delegations visited, 50 calls, 4 letters to the editor published, 4 opinion leaders recruited, and 100 opinion telegrams. These efforts continued through the month of August at approximately the same levels. In September they stepped up efforts and combined these efforts with a Witness for Peace

Contra atrocity report,<sup>15</sup> which they hoped would become a media opportunity. Also in September Countdown '87 urged people to line up outside local (Congressional) offices to register opposition to the war. As September led into October, volunteer efforts were again ramped up from 70 volunteer hours a week in August to 125 hours a week in October.<sup>16</sup>

There were several key components to this systematic organization. One of the first steps, contacting established anti-Contra aid groups in the district, was considered a critical step. The organizer was encouraged to do this as soon as they started work in the district. Not only were these anti-Contra aid NGOs considered a vital volunteer recruitment force, they were brought into discussions on creating a local field plan and taught the Countdown '87's electoral strategy. Countdown '87 considered these NGOs the "backbone of most district's campaigns." The NGOs involved in the campaign were as follows.

NGOs involved by District<sup>17</sup>

<b>House Member, Party, State, District</b>	<b>NGO</b>
Les Aspin, D, Wisconsin-1	Wisconsin Action Coalition
James Bilbray, D, Nevada-1	Neighbor to Neighbor
Thomas R. Carper, D, Delaware-al	Nicaragua Network
Glenn English, D, Oklahoma – 6	Neighbor to Neighbor
Bill Frenzel, R, Minnesota – 3	Campaign for Peace in Central America

<sup>15</sup> Again one can see Countdown '87's efforts to educate the public and members of Congress through work of NGOs. A report by Witness for Peace was nothing new but when added to a national campaign the effect was multiplied.

<sup>16</sup> Countdown '87 Material, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66/Countdown.

<sup>17</sup> Countdown '87 Organizational Affiliations in Swing Districts, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66/Countdown 87.

Bill Goodling, R, Pennsylvania – 19	Pennsylvania Public Interest Coalition
Bill Gradison, R, Ohio – 2	Ohio Public Interest Coalition
Fred Grandy, R, Iowa – 6	Iowa Citizen Action Network
Steve Gunderson, R, Wisconsin – 3	Wisconsin Action Coalition
Paul B. Henry, R, Michigan – 5	Neighbor to Neighbor
Amo Houghton, R, New York – 34	New York Citizen Action Network
Ed Jenkins, D, Georgia – 9	Witness for Peace
Raymond J. McGrath, R, New York – 5	Neighbor to Neighbor
John R. Miller, R, Washington – 1	Central America Peace Campaign
Liz J. Patterson, D, South Carolina – 4	Witness for Peace
Own B. Pickett, D, Virginia – 2	Witness for Peace
Carl D. Pursell, R, Michigan – 2	Neighbor to Neighbor
Ralph Regula, R, Ohio – 16	Ohio Public Interest Coalition
Patricia F. Saiki, R, Hawaii-1	Neighbor to Neighbor
Jim Slattery, D, Kansas – 2	Neighbor to Neighbor
Robert F. Smith, R, Oregon – 2	Oregon Fair Share
Olympia J. Snowe, R, Maine – 2	Neighbor to Neighbor
Wes Watkins, D, Oklahoma – 3	Neighbor to Neighbor
<b>Senate Member, Party, State</b>	<b>NGO</b>
William S. Cohen, R, Maine	Neighbor to Neighbor
Alan J. Dixon, D, Illinois	Illinois Public Action Council/Neighbor to Neighbor
Charles E. Grassley, R, Iowa	Iowa Citizen Action Network
Nancy L. Kassebaum, R, Kansas	Neighbor to Neighbor
Larry Pressler, R, South Dakota	Neighbor to Neighbor
Warren B. Rudman, R, New Hampshire	New Hampshire People's Alliance

Once the organizer had been hired and the NGO had been contacted, the field operation began seeking to improve communication between average citizens and their congresspersons. The goal of the average voter contacts was to show the swing voter that opposition was widespread in their district. It also showed the waffling member of Congress that their constituents were informed about complex foreign issues and motivated to do what they could do to change policy. This type of work was volunteer intensive and difficult to motivate, so Countdown '87 recommended that the organizers

look to groups already sympathetic to their cause. The organizers shared planning with these groups to facilitate feelings of ownership in the campaign, and developed volunteer recruitment strategies after judging the enthusiasm and membership of those NGOs willing to help the campaign. Not only did the organizers look to Central American groups, religious groups, and peace organizations, they also recruited volunteers from the targeted legislator's past and present opponents.

Once volunteers were recruited, they gathered lists of contacts. These lists were compiled of elected officials, civic groups, Central America-focused groups, peace groups, religious organizations, opponents, women's organizations, givers and volunteers to previous electoral opponents of the targeted legislator. These lists were used to generate contacts with the targeted legislator. Next, the organizer developed materials for the campaign. The materials were developed locally so that they could relate directly to local constituents. The purpose for these materials was to make contact with the targeted legislator. To Countdown '87 informing the constituents and assuming that they would vote the right way next time was not enough: the volunteers, the contact lists, and the materials were all aimed at pressuring the targeted legislator to vote against Contra aid on the upcoming vote. To help facilitate this end Countdown '87 gave the district offices sample letters to send out to their contacts. The letters began with statistics about Contra aid that had been focus group tested for effectiveness. The letters asked for the following action steps:

1. Contact your congressperson.
  - Call and speak directly to your congressperson about your opposition to Contra aid. If your congressperson isn't available, talk to an aide.
  - Write a personal letter urging our congressperson to oppose aid to the Contras.

- Visit your congressperson in your district or in Washington D.C. (Contact information included)
- 2. Do one or more of the following:
  - Write a letter to your local newspaper stating your opposition to Contra aid
  - Ask your friends and neighbors to talk to your congressperson about ending Contra aid
  - Attend and participate in any town meetings your congressperson holds; talk about your opposition to Contra aid
  - Call in to radio talk shows to voice your opposition to Contra aid
  - Volunteer to work locally to end Contra aid. (Contact information included)<sup>18</sup>

If the contact agreed to write a letter, they were given instructions on how to write a letter. The letters were to be personal, concise, assertive and constructive. They were encouraged to ask the legislator to vote against Contra aid in the first sentence. They also suggested that the letter writers send a copy of their letter to the editor of the local newspaper.<sup>19</sup>

Contacts from the lists compiled by district organizers were also solicited to send opiniongrams to their congressperson. These short Western Union messages cost the contact \$4.50 and were sent directly to their congressperson. The contact could choose to send one of two messages. First, “Urge you to give peace in Central America a chance by opposing aid to Contras in any form. Best chance for peace in decades. No Contra aid. Thanks.” They could also choose, “Take a stand for peace; oppose all forms of Contra aid. Allow Central American peace accords to work; keep U.S. dollars out of Nicaragua. Vote no to any Contra aid. Thanks.” All that was required of the contacts was a

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<sup>18</sup> Countdown '87 Highlights: Sample letter to contacts, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>19</sup> See sample letter in the appendix.

confirmation of their return address and a willingness to have \$4.50 charged to their phone bill.

Contracts were also given the congressperson's phone number in Washington and urged to ask them to vote against Contra aid. Callers were asked to call the week before the vote in Congress. If the contact was made prior to the week of the vote, the contact was called and reminded when it was time to contact their representative. By the end of the campaign Countdown '87 contacts and volunteers had sent over 90,000 letters, phone calls, and telegrams to legislators.

From the beginning of Countdown '87's efforts local press noted the unusual intensity of the campaign. The *Peoria Journal Star* obtained data on the volume of letters sent to Senator Alan Dixon (D, Illinois) in mid-August. The article reported that Dixon had received thousands of hand-written letters asking him to oppose Contra aid over a several week period. Dixon's press secretary told the *Journal Star* that it was clearly an organized campaign. John Cameron, program director of the Illinois Public Action Council in Chicago, stated that they had sent out about 5,000 letters in recent weeks and that they planned on sending another 1000 every week in an attempt to persuade Dixon to vote against continued aid to the Contras. Cameron's NGO was joined by Neighbor to Neighbor and the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador in a massive grassroots effort. The three NGOs had volunteers canvassing 4,000 homes a night and collecting letters to be sent to Dixon. Cameron also claimed that the letter writing campaign was just the beginning of their effort. The article noted the inconsistent voting record of Dixon and a statement by his press secretary outlining the criteria for whether

or not he would support Contra aid.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that Dixon eventually voted against Contra aid.

As these different efforts were taking place, Countdown '87 asked its district organizers to report back to headquarters at least once a week so that they could keep up with developments and shift resources as necessary. Dan McLaughlin, head of field operations, was able to review what tactics were working, and what effect the current legislative schedule changes would have on the upcoming strategy.

Countdown '87 planned media relations systematically and followed the strategy closely. Countdown '87 instructed district organizers to coordinate as many press activities as possible with other anti-Contra aid groups in the district. Organizers identified and utilized friendly editorial boards as often as possible. Organizers had both the national Countdown '87 office, and local coordinator of letters to the editor available to them to use. Organizers were encouraged to use both paid media and free media attention. Letters to the editor were considered to be both effective and budget friendly.<sup>21</sup> Contacts willing to write letters to the editor were given assistance through several models to choose from. The Countdown '87 materials included at least four different letters to the editor that included poll tested, and focus group tested phrases as well as relevant quotes from NGOs observing incidents in Nicaragua.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Even Roth, "Dixon flooded by anti-Contra letters," Peoria Journal Star, 19 August 1987.

<sup>21</sup> Countdown '87 Highlights: Field Organizing – February, 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>22</sup> Countdown '87 Letter Writing Guide, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

Articles in local papers show the effectiveness of Countdown '87's early efforts to pressure key members of Congress and gain attention for the anti-Contra cause. In late August the *Hopkins/Minnetonka Sailor's* front page announced that Representative Bill Frenzel was forced to spend much of his town meeting answering questions about Contra aid. He tried to redirect the meeting toward budget deficit questions but faced instead heated discussion and numerous questions from the crowd about Central American issues. Several members of the audience wanted Frenzel to go on the record as to how he would vote in the future, but he told the crowd that he would have to see the exact provisions of the bill before he agreed to vote yes or no.<sup>23</sup> The scene described in that article showed the Countdown '87 volunteers or community contacts following instructions on how to pressure members of Congress. Not only did they ask questions, more importantly they repeatedly asked for a commitment from their Representative.

The scenario repeated itself in Wisconsin in early September. The *Leader-Telegram* reported that "Representatives of four grass-roots organizations today kicked off Countdown '87, an attempt to convince U.S. Rep. Steve Gunderson, R-Osseo, to change his mind on supporting aid to the Nicaraguan Contras." The article hit most of the Countdown '87 talking points including the amount of money being sent from their county to the Contras, the possibility of Central America becoming another Vietnam, and the percentage (60) of Americans that opposed Contra aid. The article included quotes from local opinion leaders and ended with a pointed remark from Christel Jorgenson, a district representative for the Association of Federal, State, County and Municipal

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Crawford, "Contra aid dominates Frenzel town meeting," *Hopkins/Minnetonka Sailor*, 31 August 1987.

Employees. Jorgenson said, "Countdown '87 is intended to convince Gunderson that if he doesn't change his vote on Contra aid, 3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District residents will remember that in the November 1988 election."<sup>24</sup>

On 24 September the *Star Tribune* published an article about NGO Witness for Peace's efforts to encourage Representative Bill Frenzel,(R-Minnesota) to oppose Contra aid. The article mentioned the local and national efforts of Witness for Peace to educate the public about the issue as well as encourage legislators to oppose additional Contra aid. Frenzel's inconsistent voting record was also noted in the article, although Frenzel was quoted as saying that he would oppose any Contra aid that came up before 7 November. That date was significant because that was the ceasefire date set by the peace plan adopted by five Central American nations. For the most part this article showed many of the strategies that Countdown '87 was employing. The article mentioned pressure put on the member of Congress, mentioned the report put out by Witness for Peace, "Civilian Victims of the U.S. Contra War," and also mentioned Rev. John Sinclair, a retired Presbyterian Church executive, who had spoken at the press conference. Clearly the Minnesota group had taken the steps suggested by Countdown '87 and had employed a local opinion leader as it strove to get favorable press treatments.<sup>25</sup>

From the beginning Countdown '87 strove to get national and local opinion leaders to register their opposition to Contra aid in person to their congressperson as well

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<sup>24</sup> Dan Holtz, "Groups try to change Gunderson's mind," *Leader-Telegram*, 3 September 1987.

<sup>25</sup> Gregor W. Pinney, "Minnesota group urges Frenzel to oppose U.S. aid to Contras," *Star Tribune*, 24 September 1987.

as to the public through local media. Local NGOs had believed that local “moderate” opinion leaders would be unlikely to help. However Countdown ’87 encouraged and assisted local organizers to recruit major opinion leaders that were critical to the effort. Many of these local opinion leaders were locally-elected Republican officials, business leaders, and professionals who were not used to making a public stand on a controversial foreign policy issue. This was an impressive accomplishment for the national effort as the organizers broadened their contacts outside of the usual activists drawn from progressive, human rights, or foreign policy groups.<sup>26</sup>

These opinion leaders and celebrities were used in various venues. Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit spoke across the nation to various groups about opposing Contra aid. He openly associated himself with Countdown ’87 and spoke out against Contra aid because it was, “illegal, immoral, and unwise.” Despite the naivety of some of Gumbleton’s remarks he was given favorable press.<sup>27</sup>

The newsletter sent out on 23 September by the national Countdown ’87 office was a scorecard of sorts. It reminded the local organizers of the importance of recruiting local opinion leaders and provided tools for identifying potential contacts in their districts. In September there was a mixture of good and bad news for the campaign. It noted that the House had overwhelmingly passed a \$3.5 million dollar appropriation of humanitarian aid for the Contras. The blame for this loss was placed at the feet of

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<sup>26</sup> Field Operations, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66/ Countdown ’87.

<sup>27</sup> For example: he naively claimed that neither Cuba nor Nicaragua was trying to export their revolutions to other nations. A claim that both Castro and Ortega would dispute. Mike Smith, “Bishop speaks out against U.S. policy on Central America,” *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, 11 November 1987.

Speaker Wright who believed that the Contras needed to be supported until a final vote could be made on Contra aid. The national office believed that the “humanitarian” aid had been used in the past for political, logistical, and even military assistance, and therefore reiterated that Countdown ’87 was opposed to “all Contra aid of any kind,” and expressed their disappointment in the vote. September was not all bad however. The newsletter pointed out that the Senate voted on the 17<sup>th</sup> to table a Jesse Helms amendment which would have given military aid to the Contras. Notable among those voting to table the amendment were swing voters William Cohen, Alan Dixon, Nancy Kassebaum, and Charles Grassley. Most Senators explained their votes by expressing a desire to see how the Arias plan worked out before voting more aid to the Contras. In other good news for the campaign, the House Appropriations Committee defeated a motion for \$9 million in Contra aid 35-13 with the help of all three of Countdown’s swing votes on the committee, Representatives Carl Pursell, Ralph Regula and Wes Watkins. After proudly pointing out the direction that the swing members were leaning, the newsletter reminded their readers that the names of the swing votes were confidential.

These encouraging domestic events were in many ways a reflection of good news internationally as well. Costa Rica’s President and peace plan architect Oscar Arias visited Washington in September to ask Congress to oppose any future Contra aid. The Sandinistas also helped the prospects of voting down Contra aid by allowing Nicaraguan opposition newspaper *La Prensa* to reopen along with the Catholic Church’s radio

station. This was particularly helpful since many members who had voted in the past for Contra aid stated that they did so because of lack of press freedom in Nicaragua.<sup>28</sup>

In the September newsletter the national office informed their field contacts that the vote on Contra aid would be much later than originally anticipated. This was a sign that the Reagan administration did not feel confident in its chances, but it presented the campaign with challenges as it sought to extend the original operations plans. Since the original plan of the campaign was to continue until 1 October, the district offices had to extend their operations and write out a new plan.

In October Countdown '87 updated its field plans for the districts. The plan was split into two parts. The first part was a general plan running through mid-November. The second plan was a "two weeks till the vote plan," which was to go into effect immediately after the administration made a formal request for aid for the Contras. The second plan was to be prepared carefully and ready to be implemented immediately within a day's notice. The plan included the typical pressure tactics with an emphasis on letter writing. In addition the volunteers were to collect and hold opiniongrams for use in a flurry of contacts immediately before a vote.<sup>29</sup>

In November Countdown '87 tried its best to navigate the confusing waters of policy making in Congress. The dates and times and shape for the final Contra vote were all in flux. Since Countdown '87's plans depended on the timing of the vote, they paid

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<sup>28</sup> Countdown '87 Newsletter, 23 September, 1987, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66/Countdown 87.

<sup>29</sup> Countdown '87 Field Plan: October 1 – November 20, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

close attention to the House Rules Committee and the status of the continuing resolutions regarding Contra aid, and even kept watch on stock market fluctuations that affected every element of budget concerns including Contra aid. In the midst of the chaos Countdown '87 headquarters was pleased that, despite the legislative chaos, when time came to apply pressure to lawmakers their local districts' emergency phone canvassing plan was able to apply the necessary influence. Representative Bonior congratulated them on successfully attracting the House leadership's attention by their campaign. To further bolster their prestige and their volunteer efforts, Countdown '87 and their ideological allies were able to convince the AFL-CIO to adopt a policy of opposing military aid to the Contras. This joining of forces between labor and religious organizations and peace groups, a continuation of the coalition built during the April Mobilization, encouraged the organizers in districts with a strong union presence. Despite the fact that volunteers were now working months past their original commitments, they kept on organizing, informing and applying pressure. The uncertainty about the date for the vote was maddening, but the groups were encouraged that peace in Central America might be within their grasp.<sup>30</sup>

As the various NGOs and their allies in Congress worked to defeat Contra aid domestically, NGOs tried to make the peace work in Nicaragua. On 3 December officials of the Sandinista government held peace talks with a delegation representing the Contras. Cardinal Obando y Bravo oversaw the talks.<sup>31</sup> The talks broke down when the

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<sup>30</sup> Countdown '87 Newsletter, 3 November 1987. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Kinzer, "Sandinistas and Contras Open Talks on Peace," *New York Times*, 4 December 1987.

Sandinistas refused a proposal presented by Cardinal Obando y Bravo. His proposal included a 36-hour cease-fire over the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, a truce from 22 December to 6 January, and a loosening of press restrictions on the opposition.<sup>32</sup> While both sides had taken steps toward reconciliation, they still had a long way to go before they began to trust each other.

Events domestically also betrayed a lack of trust between political opponents. On 11 December, the House approved a bill banning the Reagan administration from turning to other nations for aid to the Contras if Congress banned direct American Military aid to the guerrillas. The Reagan administration vowed to veto the bill. On 12 December the Senate approved a \$606 billion appropriation bill that included \$16 million in nonmilitary aid for the Nicaraguan rebels. A spokesman for House Speaker Jim Wright immediately issued a statement that the aid package was not acceptable.<sup>33</sup> In the midst of this new round of wrangling the Department of State made a major revelation that quickly changed the dynamics of the debate.

On 25 October 1987 Major Roger Miranda Bengoechea left Nicaragua for a medical check-up in Mexico City. While in Mexico he asked for asylum in the United States. Prior to his defection Major Miranda served as the Chief of the Secretariat of the Nicaraguan Defense Ministry and was a member of the Sandinista Assembly. According

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<sup>32</sup> Stephen Kinzer, "Nicaraguan Talks Reach an Impasse on Primate's Plan," *New York Times*, 5 December 1987.

<sup>33</sup> AP, "House Passes a Bill Including New Curbs Over Latin Policies," *New York Times* 11 December 1987. Jonathan Fuerbringer, "Senate Approves Bill on Spending With Contra Aid." *New York Times*, 13 December 1987. Neil A. Lewis, "U.S. to Challenge Soviet Over Help For Nicaraguans," *New York Times*, 15 December 1987.

to the information provided to members of Congress, Miranda defected because of increasing corruption in Sandinista ranks and the realization that the Nicaraguan Resistance were locals rather than hired mercenaries. The list of new information given to the State Department included information about military agreements with the Soviets and a strategy for military buildup.<sup>34</sup> Caught off guard, Speaker Wright was incensed over the disclosures, while Republicans claimed that it made the vote to send additional aid easier. The Nicaragua Task Force immediately issued talking points on Miranda. They noted that he had been questioned and briefed by the State Department for two months and in that time he failed several lie-detector tests and said many contradictory statements. In addition the talking points pointed out that the media had been giving the impression that Nicaragua was building its army up to 600,000 men. In reality that number was largely made up of civilians prepared to defend their communities in the event of an attack. The talking points also questioned the political timing of the release, since it was released early enough to influence the vote, but too late to check the facts before the votes were cast. Representative George Miller also circulated annotated articles from the *Wall Street Journal* and *Newsday* showing that the Reagan administration was exaggerating the threat of the Nicaraguan military buildup.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the efforts of Democrat leaders in Congress to downplay Miranda's credibility, the question quickly changed in the House from whether aid would be

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<sup>34</sup> Letter from J. Edward Fox to Representative, 17 December 1987. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 62/Nicaragua Military.

<sup>35</sup> Talking points on the media coverage of Roger Miranda, Nicaraguan Defector, and letter from George Miller, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 62/Nicaraguan Military.

renewed to how much aid would be given.<sup>36</sup> Despite the unpopularity of Contra aid, members of Congress could not risk “losing Nicaragua” to communism. The initial compromise formed by Democratic leadership in the House was \$5 million to \$6 million in non-military aid. The eventual amount of non-military aid, passed on 20 December reached \$8.1 million and essentially a continuation of support for the Contras allowing time for the Guatemala accord to play out. Reagan saw the vote for aid as a small victory gained by use of defector Major Roger Miranda. The former senior Sandinista military officer detailed his government’s plans to bolster their military strength with Soviet help. The Reagan administration used Major Miranda effectively, shuttling him around Capitol Hill for several meetings, most potently with moderate Democrats, suggesting to these key members of Congress that the Sandinistas would not abide by the Central American peace accord. While acknowledging their victorious strategy, the Reagan administration admitted that the long term effects of Miranda’s revelations may not carry over to the vote in February.<sup>37</sup>

As events unfolded in the United States and Nicaragua the congressional leaders of both parties were willing to wait until 15 January 1988 to see how the meeting between the five Central American presidents progressed. If the process appeared to be faltering, Congress would likely approve more funding. If the process appeared to be working, Congress would have an opportunity to end the aid on 3 February 1988. Opponents of the aid, discouraged by the events surrounding the Miranda defection, put

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<sup>36</sup> Joel Brinkley, “Shift on Contras Seen in Congress,” *New York Times*, 16 December 1987.

<sup>37</sup> Neil Lewis, “A Windfall for Reagan,” *New York Times*, 22 December 1987.

their hope in the firm date for an up-or-down vote which they believed they would win.<sup>38</sup>

Not believing that events in Nicaragua were the only relevant facts in the debate, NGOs who opposed Contra funding continued to work hard to convince swing voters in key districts that their position was correct. Both sides realized that the vote would be close and therefore doubled their efforts.

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<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Fuerbringer, "Contra Aid Accord Set by Congress and White House," *New York Times*, 21 December 1987.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **POLITICAL PRESSURE**

Countdown '87 was fully aware of the political obstacles that it had to overcome if it wished to defeat Contra aid. The Reagan administration had the ability to make news, all the power of the executive branch, and years of Cold War policy to bolster its case for rolling back the revolution in Nicaragua. The Cold War mentality in Congress was also a significant obstacle to overcome. No politician wanted to share the blame for another Cuba or China falling to communism. Additionally, the Sandinistas consistently gave politicians in the United States reason to avoid appearing to side with them. The simple likelihood that the Sandinistas would publicly side with the Soviet Union on a matter, or institute a repressive policy was enough to frighten members of Congress into voting for Contra aid no matter what manner of political pressure was applied in their district. Many Republican members also hesitated to go against their own political party on an issue that was so important to President Reagan. Finally many members of Congress sincerely believed that the Contra insurgency was an important check on the power of Communist forces in the region. They had their own information sources that made the educational efforts of NGOs extremely difficult.

Despite these obstacles, Countdown '87 strategy moved forward. In late fall of 1987 they reminded organizers that they had to convince a few swing voters to change their minds. While they could not control events on the ground in Nicaragua, they certainly could use all of their powers of persuasion at home. Therefore, district by

district they dug in, hoping to change the mind of enough legislators to make a difference.

In Iowa's sixth district Countdown '87 organizers worked on Republican Representative Fred Grandy. Volunteers and contacts wrote over 2000 letters and made hundreds of phone calls. More than 100 opinion leaders from the district – elected officials of both parties, Republican business leaders, farm leaders, and religious leaders (including the Congressman's own Episcopalian priest) agreed to contact the Congressman on Contra aid. A press release was also held announcing a commissioned public opinion poll showing 73% of the Sixth District electorate opposed aid in order to spend money on needs at home. The mayor of the largest city in the district announced the poll numbers and it was carried by one television and three radio stations.<sup>1</sup>

To Representative Ralph Regula (Republican from the Sixteenth District in Ohio) Countdown '87 volunteers and contacts sent over 1300 letters. According to Regula's aide, 800 of those letters were sent by constituents who had never contacted the congressman before. Phone banks produced over 500 calls. In two of the district's three counties, Countdown '87 organized 28 Republican city or county elected officials to ask the congressman to oppose Contra aid. Other key Ohio citizens also contacted Regula including business people, prominent attorneys, union leaders, college officials, Chamber of Commerce members and attorneys. A public opinion poll commissioned by Countdown '87 showed 69% of the district's likely voters opposed further aid to the

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<sup>1</sup> Countdown '87 Highlights: Field Organizing, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

Contras. After all this pressure Regula changed his position and indicated that he would oppose any Contra aid before 7 January.<sup>2</sup>

Countdown's poll in New York's Thirty-fourth Congressional district showed that 64% of likely voters opposed further aid to the Contras. Working through NGO New York Citizen Action, Countdown '87 contacted former staunch administration supporter Representative Amo Houghton (R). After 2400 constituent contacts Houghton told Countdown '87 that he opposed aid that violated the condition of the peace accord. Not taking this position for granted Countdown '87 organizer Cathy Martin convinced seven radio stations in the district to run NGO sponsored anti-Contra ads as public service announcements.

NGO Wisconsin Action Coalition led the lobbying efforts toward Representative Les Aspin (D, WI). The pressure against Aspin, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, was particularly intense and effective. They mobilized opposition among elected officials, labor unions, religious groups, and civic organizations. Aspin had been a consistent supporter of non-lethal supplies with or without military aid given to the Contras. Countdown arranged meetings with the state Democratic Party chair, the president of the state AFL-CIO, the director of the state's UAW political arm, the director of Wisconsin Council of Churches, and other political, civic, and union representatives, who all urged him to oppose all aid to the Contras. In addition to arranging pressure by the before mentioned VIPs Countdown helped constituents send 2700 letters and make 500 phone calls urging the congressman to oppose Contra aid. Sixty-one labor leaders

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of Countdown in the Field and Countdown '87 Highlights: Field Organizing, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

also published an open letter in the Racine Labor as a ¾ page ad, asking Aspin to oppose Contra aid. Aspin could not even escape the lobbying pressure at fundraising events. At one fundraiser for Aspin, 80% of the participants wore “Les, VOTE NO” stickers provided by local Countdown ’87 volunteers. The United Auto Workers Region 10, the League of Women Voters, Racine city council members, and peace activist and author Dr. Charles Clements, held a rally outside Aspin’s office. The rally was covered by three local radio stations and a Milwaukee television station. At the rally Congressman Aspin committed to vote against all Contra aid as long as the peace process moved forward and all signatories remained involved in the process. Despite the fact that the rally was filled with traditional Democratic constituents the message was blunt and to the point. Rudy Kuzel, Shop Chairman of UAW Local 72 told reporters, “Les Aspin ought to say that he won’t spend any more money on those that rape and kill women and children, to those who burn clinics and schools and farm cooperatives.” Other labor leaders, along with community and religious representatives piled on, pointing out that Aspin was alienating long-term supporters. Aspin tried to quiet opposition by promising, if his schedule allowed to meet with opposition leaders before he changed his position. He assured the skeptical crowd that the interpretation of whether the peace process was moving forward would be based on the opinions of Costa Rican President Arias and Nicaraguan Archbishop Obando y Bravo rather than the Reagan administration. Alongside the peace activists, labor leaders, and politicians, were St Mary’s Medical Center President Edward DeMeulenaere. He informed Aspin that he was a Contra supporter until he took a neutral

health-care mission to Nicaragua. In Nicaragua he became convinced that the Contras carried out terrorist attacks and had little popular support.<sup>3</sup>

The Wisconsin Action Coalition also released a study in October that detailed the costs of Contra aid to the district. As insurance Countdown reserved 100 opiniongrams in case they needed to remind him of his district's opinion on the matter.<sup>4</sup> That additional step turned out not to be necessary. Aspin eventually voted with Countdown 87 and against Contra aid on the critical vote on 3 February 1988.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the newspaper pressure noted in Chapter 6, Congressmen William (Bill) Frenzel (Republican from Minnesota's Third District) also got deluged with mail and phone calls. His office told Countdown that the mail was running 10 to 1 against Contra aid. Countdown helped 1800 constituents write letters, and organize a 4900 participant phone tree. In addition the campaign found approximately 75 business leaders that would contact Representative Frenzel, including small business people, stockbrokers, attorneys, bankers, realtors, religious leaders, and the peace community. Hoping to have ammunition in case Frenzel was wavering, they kept 225 opiniongrams ready. Frenzel was also targeted through TV and radio ads, and press releases picked up by local

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<sup>3</sup> "Aspin Agrees to Vote Against Aid to the Contras," *The Racine Labor*, 11 December, 1987, and Jane Rider, "Aspin Giving Peace a Chance," *The Journal Times* (Racine, Wisconsin) 6 December 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of Countdown in the Field and Countdown '87 Highlights: Field Organizing, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66. Also, Nancy Torner, "Aspin Asked to Oppose Aid for Contras," *The Milwaukee Journal Metro*, 29 September 1987. The article mentioned the size of the Wisconsin Action Coalition, "It has 75,000 family members and 190 affiliated labor, senior, church and community organizations."

<sup>5</sup> Key Swing Votes on Contra Aid, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

newspapers. Despite the significant education efforts and political pressure, Frenzel voted for Contra aid on 3 February 1988.<sup>6</sup>

The question of why moderates like Representative Frenzel ignored the flood of letters, personal contacts from key constituents, and local media calling for him to vote against Contra aid is difficult to answer. Certainly he acknowledged the immense pressure he was under. Frenzel told his local paper that his previous yes votes on Contra aid were based on the fact that he believed that financially supporting the Contras were a key provision in the plan for the region.<sup>7</sup> Apparently the information that Frenzel received from NGOs did not convince him that their side had a viable alternative plan. Feeling the political pressure, Frenzel believed it necessary to ask that his comments be inserted into the *Congressional Record*. In his note Frenzel acknowledged “the intensity of anti-Contra feeling.” However, Frenzel gave several reasons for voting with President Reagan for continued funding of the Contras.

In the days prior to this note, I have had more than the usual opportunities to discuss our Central American policies with administration officials. One recent positive development coming out of such discussions was the President’s decision to involve Congress in the decision whether or not to go forward with the 10 percent of funding which is ammunition. Essentially the President is willing to give up his veto power if Congress disagrees that ammunition deliveries should go forward.

Frenzel also complained of the lack of an alternative plan, and noted that a purely humanitarian package would not be much different than the current proposal. In addition

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of Countdown in the Field and Countdown ’87 Highlights: Field Organizing, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66. Also, Key Swing Votes on Contra Aid, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Crawford, *Hopkins/Minnetonka Sailor*, 31 August 1987.

he noted the repressive and untrustworthy nature of the Sandinista regime. He stated that any progress that had been made recently was due to the pressure of the Contras.<sup>8</sup> If Frenzel's political instincts were also a factor in his vote he correctly concluded that even if he voted against the wishes of his constituents he would be still reelected to Congress in 1988.

Representative John Miller (Republican from Washington's First District) was pressured by the Central America Peace Campaign. Together with Countdown '87 they helped constituents write over 1500 letters and make 1000 phone calls. Over fifty leaders contacted Representative Miller including officers of the league of Women Voters, the head of the Sierra Club, a former president of Pacific Northwest Bell, the president of a local television station, a delegation of his past contributors, and his former campaign finance chair. The campaign also planned an educational forum on 13 December in the Congressman's synagogue. The 9000 member campaign received wide coverage in the state and also managed to attract national attention through the MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour. Delegations informed Countdown that they noticed a considerable shift in Representative Miller's attention to the issue. Following the different lobbying techniques and educational efforts Miller changed his position to supporting the Contras only if they proved effective, and promised not to support military aid while the peace

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<sup>8</sup> William Frenzel, Congressional Record, H-193, 3 February 1988.

process was in effect. Despite the pressure Miller voted for Contra aid on 3 February 1988.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of Representative Miller the Countdown '87 efforts were not a complete failure. As noted, he did pay much closer attention to the issue than he had before. However, the NGO-gathered information did not convince Representative Miller that the Sandinistas would keep their promises without the pressure of the Contras in place. On 3 February 1988 Miller said,

Mr. Chairman, the Nicaraguan people are closer to peace and democracy now than they were 1 or 2 years ago. What accounts for this progress? A combination of factors: President Arias' brilliant diplomatic initiative, the Soviet's war-weariness, insistent pressure from the political opposition and yes, the effective military opposition of the democratic resistance. Because of all these factors, President Ortega is spending this winter at the negotiating table instead of in Moscow.<sup>10</sup>

In addition Miller cited the *Seattle Times* editorial that supported this course of action.

The political pressure that the NGOs brought to bear was also inadequate in Miller's case. If purely political considerations were a factor he correctly judged that his constituents would reelect him even if he took an unpopular stance. In fact he was reelected in 1988.<sup>11</sup>

Witness for Peace generated over 850 letters sent to Representative Liz Patterson (Democrat from South Carolina's Fourth District). In addition they organized over 1200 phone calls. The Countdown sponsored poll showed 56% of likely voters opposed further

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<sup>9</sup> Examples of Countdown in the Field and Countdown '87 Highlights: Field Organizing, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66. Also, Key Swing Votes on Contra Aid, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>10</sup> John Miller, *Congressional Record*, H-135, 3 February 1988.

<sup>11</sup> Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, John Ripin Miller.

Contra aid. Key opinion leaders were also solicited, including business people, professionals, and several large donors to her last campaign. She was also contacted by women's groups, black political groups, various school officials, religious leaders, and Democratic Party officials. She resisted the pressure however, and for undisclosed reasons voted for aid to the Contras.<sup>12</sup>

The effort in Eau Claire was headed by the Wisconsin Action Coalition, an organization representing 193 affiliated groups and 50,000 members. Based on their efforts Steve Gunderson (Republican from Wisconsin's Third District) received over 2100 letters asking him to vote against Contra aid. His office received over 1100 calls. He also could not ignore the campaign over the holidays as he received hundreds of anti-Contra aid Christmas cards. Leaders in the community also came out in force: 25 farm leaders, including the heads of Farm Unity and the Farmer's Union; religious leaders, such as Lutheran and Episcopalian bishops; the business community, including members of the board of directors of the Eau Claire Chamber of Commerce; labor leaders and educators, and staff from the Wisconsin Federation of teachers. Anti-Contra aid constituents also made sure that they were represented at every public appearance he made in his home district.<sup>13</sup> As noted in Chapter 6 the *Wisconsin Leader-Telegram* covered the effort and quoted union members, dairy farmers, and peace activists. The article quoted a union leader who pledged to remember Gunderson's vote in November

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<sup>12</sup> Examples of Countdown in the Field and Countdown '87 Highlights: Field Organizing, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66. Also, Key Swing Votes on Contra Aid, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>13</sup> Examples of Countdown in the Field and Countdown '87 Highlights: Field Organizing, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

1988.<sup>14</sup> Gunderson went against the advice of union leaders and other traditional democratic groups and voted with Reagan to support the Contras.<sup>15</sup> In his speech on the floor of the House on the day of the vote, he acknowledged, “I am one of those who struggle on this very difficult question of what our policy ought to be in Central America, Nicaragua in particular.” This verbal acknowledgement of the pressure he was under was not enough to sway his vote however, Gunderson concluded,

... Then the vote today is really this: Do we believe we ought to maintain the existence of a political opposition within Nicaragua, and do we believe that we ought to have just the goal of unilateral peace at any price, or do we believe our goal ought to be peace, freedom, and democracy? If Members do believe that, they will vote yes on the resolution before us.<sup>16</sup>

Midway through the Countdown campaign Representative Bill Gradison (Republican from Ohio’s Second District) told visitors he was receiving volumes of mail concerning Contra aid. 95% of those letters were opposed to aid. By Countdown ‘87’s figures “volumes” meant nearly 1500 letters and almost 1300 phone calls opposing aid. These calls were generated by a phone tree with 1200 participants and 1500 fliers that were distributed to churches and at public events. Letters were generated by appealing to the public through newsletters, ads in local papers, locally produced cable T.V. programs and at public events. Countdown was able to organize a base of 2800 people to convince him that his constituents did not support Contra aid. They were also able to convince over 60 community leaders to contact Congressman Gradison via letters, phone calls, and

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<sup>14</sup> Dan Holtz, “Groups try to change Gunderson’s mind,” *Leader-Telegram*, (Eau Claire, WI and the Chippewa Valley).

<sup>15</sup> Key Swing Votes on Contra Aid, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>16</sup> Steve Gunderson, *Congressional Record*, H-166, 3 February 1988.

visits. Among those who contacted him were two former mayors of Cincinnati, a state senator, and city council members. Family friends, members of the business and professional communities, and teachers also asked him to oppose Contra aid. Churches also took part through pleas from the pulpits and by making their facilities available to house phone banks. A video was also produced that was sent to Gradison's office and aired on a local cable television station.<sup>17</sup> From the beginning Gradison was considered a long shot because of his conservative ideology and his previous support of aid. Countdown had a glimmer of hope that he might change his mind in November after successful pressure put on by community leaders and overwhelming constituent opposition. However, despite his statements supporting the Guatemala accords, he ended up voting for Contra aid.<sup>18</sup> In remarks inserted into the *Congressional Record*, Gradison noted the controversial nature of his vote but concluded, "Pressure, in all of its forms, has compelled the Sandinista regime to begin to move toward democratic reform. Now is not the time to remove any of the incentives for the regime to change."<sup>19</sup> It appears that Gradison found the president's information more compelling than that gathered by NGOs. He too survived the political controversy and was reelected in 1988.

While Countdown's strategy varied little from county to county, they were occasionally innovative. In rural Georgia they set up tables at county fairs and were able to effectively mobilize volunteers to let conservative Ed Jenkins (Democrat from Georgia

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<sup>17</sup> Examples of Countdown in the Field and Countdown '87 Highlights: Field Organizing, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>18</sup> Key Swing Votes on Contra Aid, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>19</sup> Bill Gradison, *Congressional Record*, H 196, 3 February 1988.

's Ninth District) know that they opposed Contra aid. This group, spear-headed by NGO Witness for peace, also managed to get 58 letters published by local newspapers calling for an end to Contra aid. NGO Concerned Citizens for Central America also worked to pressure Jenkins. They successfully attracted press attention after sending more than 500 letters to Jenkins between August and early October. They admitted to the *Gainesville Times* that they primarily worked to pressure Jenkins rather than merely serve an educational purpose. This pressure came in the form of letter writing, phone calls, opinion-gram, and the aforementioned county fair letter writing effort. Concerned Citizens for Central America found that many people were confused about the Contra aid issue and that even those that believed they understood the issue were unwilling to take a definite position on the controversial issue.<sup>20</sup>

Witness for Peace headed the efforts in Representative Owen Pickett's district (Democrat from Virginia's Second District). They were able to organize 1400 letters and 700 phone calls themselves and help other organizations send another 400 letters. They activated phone trees on three separate occasions in order to make a total of 240 additional calls. Members of the organization were also able to have 15 letters to the editor published. This pressure, coupled with favorable coverage in Radio, T.V., and the major newspaper in the district helped shift Pickett's views on Contra aid. At the beginning of the campaign he stated that he would take his constituent's views under consideration. By the end of the campaign he stated, "The U.S., in my opinion, can seek to perfect the peace plan by engaging in bilateral negotiations with Nicaragua... We have

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<sup>20</sup> Jane Mintz, "500 Letters Oppose Aid to Contras," *Gainesville Times*, 6 October 1987.

no more right to interfere in the internal affairs of Nicaragua than we do any other country in the world.”<sup>21</sup> Despite this statement that gave Countdown ’87 organizers hope, Pickett ended up voting for additional Contra aid.

Representative Robert Smith (Republican from Oregon’s Second District) had previously expressed philosophical support for the Contras. He was not necessarily a dependable vote for the Reagan administration on every vote, however, because of his concerns that the funds be accounted for. After NGO Oregon Fair Share, helped produce over 800 letters, over 1600 phone calls, and a long list of influential opinion leaders called on Representative Smith, his position changed. Midway through the campaign he expressed support for “a negotiated end to the conflicts in the region rather than a military solution.”<sup>22</sup> However, he eventually agreed with President Reagan’s position that the presence of the Contras was essential for a negotiated end to the conflict and voted to support Contra aid.

Senator Alan Dixon (Democrat from Illinois) was paid special attention by Countdown ’87. Dixon, one of two Northern Democratic Senators to vote for sending \$100 million to the Contras in 1986, received serious pressure to change his mind and his vote this time around. Dixon received more than 27,000 handwritten letters from concerned citizens who had been organized through door to door canvassing and

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<sup>21</sup> Examples of Countdown in the Field and Countdown ’87 Highlights: Field Organizing, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66. Jenkins eventually sided with the president on Contra aid.

<sup>22</sup> Examples of Countdown in the Field and Countdown ’87 Highlights: Field Organizing, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66. Opinion leaders who contacted Smith included mayors, state legislators, local officials, business, religious, and civic leaders.

“tabling” efforts across the state in shopping centers, supermarkets, and in downtown areas at lunchtime. A group of prominent Democratic fundraisers and labor leaders in Illinois sent letters to 750 opinion leaders and by December 1987, 200 had responded. Different delegations were formed to contact Senator Dixon. A religious delegation consisting of 40 members contacted the Senator. The Business Executives and Professionals Against Contra Aid, including several chief executive officers, grew to 85 strong and contacted the Senator individually. They also sent a letter requesting a delegation. In addition to organizing the business community, Countdown organized the Illinois Democrats Against Contra Aid, which was a committee of 110 Democratic elected officials. The committee included the majority of the members of the Chicago city council, the state treasurer and gubernatorial candidate, as well as Roland Burris, Illinois State Controller and vice-chair of the Democratic National Committee. In addition 40 bus signs, “Senator Dixon: Vote No on Contra Aid,” were purchased for a month.<sup>23</sup> Local papers noticed the concerted effort. *The Argus* (Rock Island) noted the key components of Countdown’s strategy including commercials, telephone calls, and other grassroots lobbying.<sup>24</sup> This organized campaign to educate and influence Dixon succeeded in persuading him to vote against Contra aid.

Republican Representative Thomas Caper (Delaware First District) was also on the list of targeted swing voters. NGO Nicaragua Network organized and strengthened

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<sup>23</sup> Examples of Countdown in the Field and Countdown ’87 Highlights: Field Organizing, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>24</sup> Cheryl Baltzer, “Ad Campaign to Oppose Contra Aid,” *The Argus*, 28 January, 1988. The Quad City Times also picked up the story, Harvey Berkman, “Groups Urge Dixon to Reject Contra Aid,” 28 January, 1988.

local groups concerned about Central America. They were able to mobilize approximately 500 letters and 800 phone calls. They also mobilized a delegation consisting of an elected city councilmember, the head of the state Rainbow Coalition, and a past state president of N.O.W. Bus signs were bought as well.<sup>25</sup> Carper voted against aid for the Contras.

Representative Bill Goodling (R, PA-19) received over 800 letters and phone calls. Countdown was also able to persuade eighty-eight opinion leaders who contacted the congressman via mail or phone. Among those opinion leaders were state representatives, city and county elected officials, professionals, religious leaders, the president of Gettysburg College, past president of Danskin, and the president of the largest insurance company in the district. Countdown supporters showed up at all three town meetings that Representative Goodling held in the fall and made their voices heard at the meeting and in the press following the event. Countdown's polling report released in November was carried in five newspapers and two radio stations. The report noted that 63% of likely voters in the district opposed aid to the Contras.<sup>26</sup> Goodling went against the polls and the opinion leaders however, and voted to continue funding the Contras.

While papers in key congressional districts reported on efforts of individuals and NGOs to persuade members of Congress to vote against Contra funding, national papers marveled at the resiliency of Reagan's plans. The *Washington Post* noted that Speaker

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<sup>25</sup> Countdown '87 Highlights: Field Organizing – February, 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>26</sup> Countdown '87 Highlights: Field Organizing – February, 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

Wright had expressed hope that the \$3.5 million approved in October 1987 would have been the last United States aid spent on the Contras. However, after facing a threatened veto for all funding for the federal government in fiscal 1988, he reluctantly agreed to another \$8.1 million to keep the Contras in business through February. The *Washington Post* then noted that final showdown votes had been elusive since the program's onset in 1982. Part of the credit went to Reagan's refusal to take no for an answer, but the rest of the blame lay at the feet of the Ortega brothers who ran Nicaragua. Whether it was an ill-timed trip to Moscow in 1985, restrictions of civil liberties, cross border raids into Honduras, or the military escalation plans (revealed by defector Maj. Roger Miranda Bengoechea), the Ortega brothers repeatedly gave the Reagan administration the evidence it needed to convince enough Democratic members of Congress to support the Contras.<sup>27</sup> This pattern of totalitarian communist behavior on the part of the Sandinistas made persuading many members of Congress too difficult for Countdown '87 to overcome. Despite firm evidence of Contra atrocities and the very apparent fact that a vast majority of their district or state did not approve of Contra aid, the Representatives and Senators believed that as soon as they voted to end Contra aid the Sandinistas would embarrass them through reckless behavior.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> John M. Goshko, "Contra Aid: New Rescue, New Showdown. Administration keeps Getting Help From Unexpected Sources Before Crucial Hill Votes." *Washington Post*, 3 January 1988.

<sup>28</sup> It appears that in the final analysis many swing votes in the House agreed with Congressman Curtis Weldon (R, PA) who said on the floor of the House of Representatives 3 February 1988, "The issue at hand today is one of trust. The issue is whether we can trust the Sandinistas." Weldon's audience understood him to mean no. *Congressional Record*, House.

While the Sandinistas seemed to care little for the embarrassment of politicians in the United States, they were concerned with their failing economy. As 1988 began the Sandinistas could not help to see that they had paid a high price for their ideological commitments and political missteps. Government mismanagement of the economy, falling prices for agricultural exports, a drain of professionals and little investment by businessmen, who lacked confidence in the economy or feared having their companies expropriated, had led to a crippled economy.<sup>29</sup> These facts coupled with the successes the Contras were able to achieve militarily made many wonder if the Sandinistas' support among the populace was fading. While the economy was spiraling out of control, the Sandinistas did keep a firm grip on the police, army, the main trade unions, and kept a strong base of support from key elements of the populace. A sign of the dwindling support however was the official ban on public opinion polls. The Sandinistas clearly assumed that an accurate public opinion poll would damage their credibility both at home and in the United States Congress. They knew that the polls would go against them because of their day to day observations of discontent from the poverty-ridden peace-starved inhabitants of Managua.<sup>30</sup> As 1988 dawned, the Sandinistas decided that their very survival rested on their ending the Contra war. That objective, once reached, could hopefully breathe life into Nicaragua's economy, invite needed investment from Western democracies, and perhaps even lay a foundation for stable relationships with their

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<sup>29</sup> James Lemoyne, "In Nicaragua, Economy is Hobbling Sandinistas," *New York Times*, 20 December, 1987.

<sup>30</sup> James Lemoyne, "Bitterness and Apathy in Nicaragua," *New York Times*, 29 December 1987.

political opponents.<sup>31</sup> The ending of the war depended on the success of the peace process and specifically their ability to make enough concessions to convince the United States Congress of their sincerity. That, however, had to be done without losing their grip on an increasingly more volatile domestic political situation. This scenario made dramatic compromises much more likely.

Reagan also faced some difficult choices. He did not want to leave an aggressive communist power in Central America, but understood that his support in Congress for aiding the Contras had gone down considerably. Unless something dramatic happened it appeared that the Sandinistas would outlast the Reagan administration. However, Reagan remained determined to continue the struggle, rather than seek some sort of negotiated truce. To all outside observers, including the International Verification Commission (IVC), the simple fact was that the war showed no sign of ending. The IVC noted that Honduras was still helping the Contras and that Nicaragua was still aiding leftist guerillas in El Salvador. The IVC also proclaimed that, aside from Costa Rica, no country demonstrated a deep commitment to regional peace. The United States still supported the Contras, and Cuba and the Soviet Union still supported the Sandinistas.<sup>32</sup> Three out of the four peace monitors concluded that the Sandinistas had not met its obligations and expressed their fears openly that the Central America accord would fail in the same

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<sup>31</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 577.

<sup>32</sup> James Lemoyne, "Latin Peace Hopes Seem to be Bleak Before Key Talks," *New York Times*, 10 January 1988.

manner as Contadora.<sup>33</sup> The Reagan administration hoped that once again the Sandinistas would show their true colors by their action or inaction on key provisions in the peace agreement. These steps or lack of progress could then be highlighted by the Reagan administration and used to secure enough funding to keep the Contras in the field until the Sandinistas collapsed. This political reality was not lost on members of Congress. Members of a Congressional delegation visiting Nicaragua on 12 January plainly warned the Sandinistas that Washington was watching their movements closely. In fact, a failure to open direct talks with the Contras would help convince undecided voters to side with the Reagan administration.<sup>34</sup> As unstable as the political climate surrounding Contra aid had become, it would not take much to tip the balance.

This was a time for watching, working, and waiting. NGOs worked their political strategy district to district, Representatives and Senators waited for evidence of compliance on the ground in Nicaragua, and the Reagan administration kept careful watch on the list of swing voters. They were not comforted by what they saw. The vote counts for aid was close enough to cause the Reagan Administration anxiety over any comments made by the presidents of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica regarding the Contras.<sup>35</sup> The Reagan administration knew that many of the swing voters were looking for any sign of political cover that a foreign head of state could provide.

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen Kinzer, "Peace Monitors Criticize Sandinistas," *New York Times*, 11 January 1988.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Kinzer, "U.S. Legislators Warn Sandinistas on Peace Talks," *New York Times*, 13 January 1988.

<sup>35</sup> Joel Brinkley, "Unlocking Contra Aid: 4 Men Called Key," *New York Times*, 14 January 1988.

Therefore the Reagan administration pressured the Central American governments, which were meeting to discuss how the peace process was progressing, to not make any sort of definitive statement. The Central American governments complied with Reagan's wishes and were vague enough about the progress of the peace process to give each side an opportunity to spin the findings to their advantage. President Arias of Costa Rica, realizing that Central America did not have the political will to impose peace on their terms, looked instead to the halls of Congress. Knowing what it would take to convince the dozens of voters on the fence, he told reporters that Contra aid would pass if the Sandinistas did not comply quickly.<sup>36</sup>

Throughout the battle in Congress fitting the available information into rhetorical salvos had played a key role in the debate. 15 January was no exception. The Reagan administration released an eleven page document outlining their case against the Sandinistas. The document highlighted the democratic aims of the Contras and laid the blame for the civil war directly at the feet of the Sandinistas. The White House "Issue Brief" also gave the press two pages of quotations from non-administration sources lending credibility to its claims.<sup>37</sup> Not to be outdone NGO WOLA fired off its own educational salvo. Their packet released on 15 January highlighted the findings of the International Verification Commission that most closely supported their aim of ending support to the Contras. On the front page of the eight page, thirty-seven point news release WOLA noted,

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<sup>36</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 578.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Board, White House Issue Brief, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 62/Peace Plan.

In spite of the exhortation of the Central American presidents, the government of the United States of America maintains its policy and practice of providing assistance, military in particular, to the irregular forces operating against the government of Nicaragua. The definitive cessation of this assistance continues to be an indispensable requirement for the success of the peace efforts and of this Procedure as a whole.<sup>38</sup>

In the midst of the international intrigue and educational efforts of both the Reagan administration and concerned NGOs continued their efforts to convince wavering members of Congress. The NGOs and Democratic politicians that made up the leadership of Countdown '87 believed that Contra aid was immoral whether or not the peace plan succeeded. However, they acknowledged that if the peace plan failed, or even faltered significantly, Contra aid would continue. They reminded their field staff that Congress had passed a long-term continuing resolution (CR) to fund the government through September 1988. Included in the CR was 14.4 million in Contra aid as well as provisions stating that all aid, new aid and previously approved military aid, would cease on 12 January pending the meeting of the Central American presidents on January 15. Reagan then had the power to certify that, "there is no cease-fire in Nicaragua; the Sandinistas are at fault; and the Contras have acted in good faith." Aid would then continue until 29 February regardless of Congressional action. Considering all the complexities of the situation, Countdown did not expect much from the meeting of the Central American presidents, other than continuing forward with the peace plan with limited reservations.

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<sup>38</sup> News from Washington Office on Latin America: International Verification Commission Calls for Cutoff of U.S. Aid to the Contras, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 62/Peace Plan. The report noted that the Verification Commission was composed of the five Central American foreign ministers, the secretaries-general of the Organization of American States and the United Nations, and representatives from the Contadora and Support Group countries. It was established in the Guatemala accord to oversee compliance by the five Central American countries.

Countdown '87 expected Reagan to highlight the reservations and certify the absence of a cease fire and resume aid as well as request additional aid under the provisions in the CR. This request would be submitted to Congress in late January and come to a vote in the House on 3 February. They did not speculate whether or not the aid would be massive or merely symbolic, but they did anticipate that the request would be followed by an “intensified propaganda campaign at a level comparable to that of publicizing Miranda’s testimony in December. Countdown '87 rightly predicted that undecided House members would be under heavy pressure from the White House and conservative groups.”<sup>39</sup>

Countdown believed that the intense battle over Contra aid would be the central political issue in late January and early February. They believed that, at least for the moment, other issues like the budget deficit, Supreme Court nominees, the declining dollar, even the presidential nominees, would be in the background. Considering the strength of their position, due to the public’s distaste for additional Contra funding, Countdown believed this was their best chance to defeat additional funding. The following factors given to their field staff gave them some degree of confidence:

- The vote is certain to be on February 3 in the House, so our planning can be much more specific than in the past;
- The request will be unamendable and substitutions are not permitted, eliminating confusing and expedient 11<sup>th</sup> hour compromises;
- The issue will stand alone, and will be judged on its own merits, not as part of a larger budget issue;
- House leaders are committed to an all-out fight on the issue regardless of the size of the request;
- Only one house of Congress needs to defeat the request;

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<sup>39</sup> Countdown Update 1/12/88 (in Bonior’s notes it is mislabeled 87, but since Countdown did not exist in January 87, nor did the Central American Presidents meet regarding the Guatemalan Accords in January of 1987, therefore the author is convinced that this is a typo), Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

- There can be no threat of a presidential veto.  
This is really the opportunity we've been working for!<sup>40</sup>

With renewed energy the national office, field staff, and associated NGOs resumed work on their final activities before the vote. Countdown '87 sent a field plan for the period from 14 January to 4 February to the activists working in swing districts. Countdown encouraged their teams not only to complete the suggested steps, but also to complete them in such a way to maximize publicity. The action steps included press releases and conferences including local groups and opinion leaders taking anti-Contra aid stands. They also suggested that local opinion leaders meet with the editorial boards of their local newspapers. The activists were to place people at all town meetings and get at least ten people to ask anti-Contra aid questions as well as send three delegations to talk with the member of congress including one delegation of highest level opinion leaders and two delegations of second level opinion leaders. The plan also broke things down week by week. By 20 January the local activists were to have contacted four new opinion leaders and persuade them to write a letter to the editor. They were also to submit 14 letters to the editor and arrange for 25 letters from the constituents to the member of congress. All of these details were part of the overall strategy that Countdown had come up with after extensive meetings with Congressional leaders, NGOs, and the Countdown field staff.

The strategy was straightforward. After meeting the various NGOs and politicians, Countdown '87 staff believed that the 3 February vote was their best chance to end Contra aid and committed to work together to achieve that end. They decided to

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<sup>40</sup> Countdown Update 1/12/88, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

focus their efforts on the House, since the numbers were most favorable there. They agreed to work to form a “comfort zone” that would allow them to oppose additional Contra aid. This comfort zone would be created by massive local effort. The Countdown staff and supporters knew that they would face a national Reagan administration campaign in the days and weeks preceding the 3 February vote and thus prepared to counter it through letters to the editor, local op-eds,<sup>41</sup> speakers, and local and national radio/television advertising the week before the vote. During the final week local efforts would shift to generating massive constituent contacts with legislators. Groups outside of Countdown ’87 would also be tapped. Countdown ’87 was willing to provide information and strategy tips to similar organizations. The House leadership planned to make a series of public appearances and media-focused activities to coincide with Countdown ’87’s work. Speaker Jim Wright planned to be on talk-shows in mid-January, and had an appearance on “Nightline” scheduled for 18 January. A prominent Democrat was scheduled to respond to Reagan’s speech on 20 January, and Speaker Wright and Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd (WV) planned to respond to President Reagan’s State of the Union Address on 25 January. In addition several prominent Democrats planned to meet with the editorial boards of leading national newspapers throughout January. The mix of pressure exerted by local efforts and credibility gained by opinions expressed in the national media would, Countdown ’87 hoped, create a comfort zone so that the wavering

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<sup>41</sup> Short for opinion pieces or editorials written in local newspapers.

members of the House of Representatives could vote against Contra aid with the maximum amount of political cover.<sup>42</sup>

According to their best estimates, the vote would be very close. Countdown told its field staff,

The best estimates available today are that 196 House members oppose further Contra aid, 160 members will support it, and 72 members are undecided. Of the 72 undecided votes, we feel that 22 are very likely to vote for aid in the end, leaving 50 members genuinely undecided. All but one of the Countdown targets is among the 50 crucial votes, so our efforts will be critical to bringing an end to Contra aid.<sup>43</sup>

Countdown '87's most optimistic hopes were for a substantial defeat, perhaps as many as 30 votes. A defeat of that magnitude would likely weaken the political will of the president and other Contra supporters therefore reducing the likelihood of another request later in the year. With their eyes on that goal the NGOs and Democrat politicians moved forward, hoping that international events did not derail their efforts.

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<sup>42</sup> Countdown Update 1/12/88, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>43</sup> Countdown Update 1/12/88, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

## CHAPTER 9

### LAST-MINUTE LOBBYING

The Reagan administration continued to lobby for Contra aid as the vote approached. The Democrat controlled Congress wavered between their dislike of the destructive Contra policy and their desire to avoid being blamed for communist advances so close to the United States. In this volatile environment any small shift of events on the ground of Nicaragua could have huge implications for United States foreign policy. This small shift occurred in mid-January 1988.

When Daniel Ortega went to the summit meeting on 15 January,<sup>1</sup> he hoped to arrange a 30-day extension of the deadline for compliance with the provisions of the Guatemala accords. He certainly had reason to hope; at the time of the talks only Costa Rica was in complete compliance with the plans calling for cease-fires, amnesties, democratic reforms, and an end to logistical and tactical support for insurgencies. While Ortega had hoped for accommodation, what he found was unified opposition. The

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<sup>1</sup> 15 January was a day highly anticipated on all sides of the struggle. Reagan had paused airdrops to Contra rebels until the meeting was held perhaps fearing to be seen as deliberately sabotaging the peace process. Illustrating the importance of the educational campaigns both sides released reports about their assessment of the level of compliance by the Sandinistas. Small NGOs made headlines with their reports. The Puebla Institute, a non-partisan lay Roman Catholic human rights organization, released a 102 page report that was highly critical of the Sandinistas' lack of progress in relation to religious freedom. They noted that many of their concessions were symbolic rather than substantive and that the Protestant churches and private schools were not given adequate freedom. Reports like these were helpful as the Reagan administration strove to prove that the Sandinistas' words were no substitute for action. Larry Witham, "Sandinista Suppression of Religion Seen Hardly Changed," *The Washington Times*, 15 January 1988.

presidents of Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica and Guatemala insisted that the Sandinistas submit to the accords without excuses. Astutely Ortega recognized that opposing a united front would isolate the Sandinistas politically and would likely result in renewed Contra aid. Therefore, in an unexpected move, President Daniel Ortega agreed to open direct talks with Contra leaders and suspend a state of emergency, and therefore many of the oppressive restrictions on the citizens in Nicaragua. This move, far beyond what Democrats in Congress expected or hoped for, weakened the Sandinistas politically in Nicaragua but moved them unmistakably in the direction of compliance.<sup>2</sup> Cynical diplomats at the talks speculated that Ortega's move was a political move designed to block approval of renewed American military aid to the Contras and questioned whether or not these steps were as groundbreaking as they first appeared. They also noted that Ortega did not define specifically what the lift on a state of emergency would mean, or indicate that the direct negotiations would discuss broad political issues.<sup>3</sup> Undeterred, the Reagan administration announced that they remained committed to supporting the Contras. They explained their position by noting that the Sandinistas had a track record of broken promises, rhetoric, and cosmetic fixes. They also steadfastly maintained that the Contras had brought the Sandinistas to the bargaining table and the continued support of the Contras would be a valuable insurance policy. Cardinal Obando y Bravo also expressed skepticism at the progress made, noting that there was talk of democratization, but that it had not yet happened. In Contrast, the opponents of Reagan's policies

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<sup>2</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 578-9.

<sup>3</sup> James Lemoyne, "Nicaragua Agrees to Talk Directly With the Contras," *New York Times*, 17 January 1988.

expressed pleasure at the news and heralded the Sandinistas concessions. They argued that these concessions showed that the Sandinistas were serious about the peace process and pointed out that new military aid would only sabotage the process.<sup>4</sup> Illustrating the importance of these concessions, Republican John McCain quickly declared that if the Sandinistas lived up to their promises in the next weeks, he would vote to suspend aid to the Contras. The concessions also gave Representative David Bonior hope. He believed that if the Sandinistas kept their promises then the odds were good that Congress would deny more aid to the Contras.<sup>5</sup>

As the news outlets buzzed about the implications of the Sandinistas' surprising concessions, NGO Wisconsin Action Coalition brought an Ex-Contra official to town to speak against additional Contra aid. Edgar Chamorra, former director of communications for the Contras from 1981-1984, was brought to town as part of an effort to convince Representative Les Aspin to vote against Contra aid. Chamorra told reporters that he supported the Central American peace plan authored by President Arias because it was the best plan to resolve the crisis.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the international events that had gone in favor of those who opposed future Contra aid, the vote still appeared close. With most members of Congress

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<sup>4</sup> Elaine Sciolino, "Reagan Will Seek More Contra Aid Despite New Move," *New York Times*, 18 January 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Sciolino, "Vote on Contra Aid Thrown Into Turmoil," *New York Times*, 19 January 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Schneeberger, "Ex-Contra Official Pushes Peace Plan," *The Journal Times* (Racine Wisconsin), 20 January 1988. Chamorra told reporters that he abandoned the Contras after recognizing that he was being used by the United States Government to spread propaganda and disinformation.

committed on one side or the other, both sides focused on the few dozen swing vote left. Believing that the 27-member Texas delegation was persuadable, the president targeted them specifically in his weekly radio address. Reagan theorized that if the Contras were not supported, Nicaragua could eventually threaten stability in Mexico.<sup>7</sup> While this possibility seemed unlikely, perhaps Reagan hoped that it might help change the mind of one representative in Congress who was facing the reality that 58 percent of the American public opposed military and other aid for the Contras.<sup>8</sup>

Regan chose to use the publicity surrounding his last State of the Union address to ask for additional Contra aid. On 26 January 1988, the White House revealed that it would ask Congress for \$36.25 million in aid for the Contras including \$3.6 million to buy weapons. This number was considerably less than the \$270 million sought in the fall of 1987. Further illustrating the Reagan administration's vulnerability on the issue, the plan stipulated that the military aid would be held in escrow until 31 March and released only if the Contras and the Sandinista government had not reached agreement on a cease-fire by then. The amount of the military aid was the result of debates inside the administration as well as negotiations between the Reagan administration and moderate elements in Congress. On 22 January moderate Congressmen asked President Reagan to request only non-lethal aid which could exert pressure on the Sandinistas, but not give them a reason to walk out of the Central American peace plan. Reagan was reluctant to agree. They believed that the Contras had the advantage militarily and were likely to lose

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<sup>7</sup> Neil A. Lewis, "Contra Aid Foes Gaining in House," *New York Times*, 24 January 1988.

<sup>8</sup> E.J. Dionne Jr. "Reagan Influence Wanes, Poll Finds," *New York Times* 26 January 1988.

that advantage if lethal aid was cut off as it was in 1986. The best information Reagan had suggested that the Contras would disband without assurances of a continued supply of weapons and ammunition. With a limited supply of ammunition, the Contras would likely face renewed attacks by the Sandinistas who tried to force them to use up their limited resources. In addition the Reagan administration believed that the 3 February vote was the last opportunity to consider military aid to the Contras. They believed it unlikely that the situation in Nicaragua would resolve itself before June and the country would be involved in the presidential election from July until November, and Contra funding was not a welcome debate for any of the presidential candidates. Finally, the Reagan administration believed that a scaled-back request had a chance of passing.<sup>9</sup>

Predictably, the plan met immediate opposition in the Democratic controlled Congress. Despite the internal numbers showing a razor-thin margin, Speaker Wright, Representative Tony Coelho of California, and Representative Bonior all expressed confidence that the measure would be defeated. Reagan wasted little time and met with key swing voters in the Senate while assuring them and the press that the White House would consult informally with Central American leaders about provisions in the measure.<sup>10</sup>

In response to the president's request, Countdown '87 immediately launched its planned media blitz. The press releases from Democratic politicians highlighted the importance of using media to get the message out, educate the public, and direct the

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<sup>9</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 579-81.

<sup>10</sup> Joel Brinkley, "White House Seeks \$36 Million in Aid for the Contras," *New York Times*, 27 January 1988."

actions of the public.<sup>11</sup> The *New York Times* found the efforts newsworthy and covered the efforts to target members in 17 swing districts through radio advertisements and television spots that asked voters to lobby their Representative or Senator to vote against the Contra aid package. The article quoted one of the targeted legislators, Representative Ray McGrath, who was not sure what the advertisements' effect would be, but did note that he did indeed remain undecided.<sup>12</sup> Regional newspapers also paid attention to the advertisements. The *Minnesota Daily* described the advertisements for their readers, noting that they featured Dr. Benjamin Spock pleading for Central America's children as well as another advertisement that featured Elisabeth Linder, whose son Benjamin was killed by Contras in Nicaragua. The *Minnesota Daily* also reminded its readers that the advertisements were part of a campaign launched to persuade Representative Bill Frenzel

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<sup>11</sup> Mel Levine, Press Conference Statement, Estaban E. Torres, Press Conference Statement, Tom Harkin, Press Conference Statement, 27 January 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>12</sup> Julie Johnson, "Opponents of Aid to Contras to Start Broadcast Campaign," *New York Times*, 31 January 1988. Due to the coordination of Countdown '87 local papers in swing districts from New York to Los Angeles carried the news no-doubt adding exposure to the advertisements. These articles typically repeated the Countdown '87 talking points comparing Nicaragua to Vietnam and noting the waste of taxpayer money. Also noteworthy were quotes by the representatives themselves who tended to acknowledge the poll numbers and complain about the simplicity of the ad claims. Cheryl Baltzer, "Ad campaign to oppose Contra aid," *The Argus*, Rock Island (Illinois), 28 January 1988, Harvey Berkman, "Groups urge Dixon to Reject Contra Aid, Quad-City Times (Illinois), 28 January 1988, Mike Gors, "Grandy Target of Campaign Against More Aid to the Contras," *Sioux City Journal*, 28 January 1988, "Anti-rebel Group Urging Frenzel to Vote Down Aid," *St. Paul Pioneer Press-Dispatch*, 28 January 1988. Steven M. Peristein, "Local Group Tries to Sway Frenzel's Vote on Contra Aid, *Minnesota Daily*, 28 January 1988, "Peace Group Plans Ads to Pressure Frenzel," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 27 January 1988. A.P., "Bird Offers Rival Plan to Reagan Contra Aid," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 29 January, 1988. The article referred to the opposition as a combination of church and peace groups who "mobilized to put pressure on key undecided members of Congress."

(R-Minn) to vote against the Contra aid package authored by the Reagan administration. Frenzel's spokesperson told reporters that he had been receiving about 50 letters a day, most of which urged Frenzel to vote against the aid. In addition to the several peace activists that made statements to the press, Edgar Chamorro was also still in Minnesota urging Frenzel to vote against any type of aid to the Contras.<sup>13</sup> This combination of professionally produced advertisements, celebrity endorsements, credible outside sources, and prominent political backing, were produced to highlight the breadth of opposition that existed against further aid for the Contras. The advertisements used poll-tested themes and were sharply focused at continuing to apply pressure to wavering members of Congress. These advertisements were backed up by the intense grassroots efforts directed by 75 organizers who had overseen the writing of over 65,000 letters, thousands of phone calls, as well as visits to Congressional offices.<sup>14</sup>

As the television and radio advertisements began to air in swing districts, Reagan also took to the airways. Reagan's radio address on 30 January continued the intense lobbying of the swing voters in Congress. In the address he stated, "There is hope that

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<sup>13</sup> Steven M. Peristein, Local Group Tries to Sway Frenzel's Vote on Contra Aid, *Minnesota Daily*, 28 January 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Rosa DeLauro, Countdown Campaign Against Contra Aid Buys TV, Radio Spots in 17 Congressional Districts Plus Washington: Countdown Polling in Key Districts Shows Majority Opposes Further Aid to Contra Rebels in Nicaragua. 27 January 1988. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66. The ads were run in the following house districts: Les Aspin (WI-1), Bill Frenzel (MN-3), Bill Gradison (OH-2), Fred Grandy (IA-6), Steve Gunderson (WI-3), Paul Henry (MI-5), Amo Houghton (NY-34), Ray McGrath (NY-5), Alan Mollohan (WV-1), Elizabeth Patterson (SC-4), Owen Pickett (VA-2), Carl Pursell (MI-2), Patricia Saiki (HI-1), Jim Slattery (KS-2), Olympia Snowe (ME-2). The ads were also run in two states targeting Sen. Pete Wilson (CA), and Sen. Alan Dixon (IL).

with the freedom fighters keeping up the pressure, the Communists will observe still further provisions of the peace plan, permitting Nicaragua at least to inch toward the conditions of genuine democracy.”<sup>15</sup> Reagan also announced plans to appeal to the nation on television the night before the vote. Reagan’s public lobbying was matched by Democratic leaders in the House of Representatives who met privately with likely swing voters who were looking for political cover by forging an alternative plan. Democratic leaders reminded the waffling legislators that a vote against aid lined up with public opinion, but the swing voters refused to make commitments, knowing that the political reality could shift quickly if the region became “lost” to the communist Sandinistas.<sup>16</sup>

Using what they learned from the failed efforts in the past, Countdown used events to channel energy from NGOs, and to give local opinion leaders a forum to speak out against Contra aid. As the vote approached, they rolled out a steady stream of events, protests, and even charity drives. Those events began on 21 January with the Mayor’s Initiative. The initiative featured the release of a statement signed by 27 mayors including Minneapolis Mayor Donald Fraser, Newark Mayor Sharpe James, New Orleans Mayor Sidney Barthelemy, and Berkeley Mayor Loni Hancock. On 25 January, coinciding with Reagan’s State of the Union Address, actor Martin Sheen, veteran Brian Wilson,

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<sup>15</sup> Steven V. Roberts, “Reagan Presses Case for Aid to Nicaragua Rebels,” *New York Times*, 31 January 1988. Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri delivered the Democrat response saying, “The way to greater freedom in Nicaragua is not greater firepower for the Contras.”

<sup>16</sup> Julie Johnson, “President Presses Contra Aid Plan,” *New York Times*, 28 January 1988. Steven V. Roberts “Reagan Presses Case for Aid to Nicaragua Rebels,” 31 January 1988. On the eve of the vote many Democrats remained resolutely opposed to the aid while worrying that they would be blamed for the “loss” of Nicaragua in the same fashion that Cuba and China were “lost.”

Congressional Medal of Honor winner Charlie Liteky, and others protested Contra aid. On 28 January the Quest for Peace program, led by Baltimore Bishop Frank Murphy, filled up a 40-foot container with \$300,000 worth of humanitarian aid for the people of Nicaragua. The charity drive and event took place near the capitol building. Also on 28 January major superiors of Catholic congregations met with missionaries to Nicaragua, in an event called “Catholic Opposition to Contra Aid,” concerning Contra aid. On 1 February national religious leaders issued statements against Contra aid.<sup>17</sup> These events, while small and seemingly inconsequential, were publicized well and coordinated with the national advertising campaign. This coordinated publicity added weight to every event and showed that Countdown had learned from the mistakes made in the April Mobilization. No longer were the events just noise, now the events were instead constant reminders to the vacillating members of Congress that both opinion makers and the general public were solidly against Contra aid.

The case of Fred Grandy illustrates the intense tug of war that took place in late January for every undeclared member of Congress. Certainly he heard about the issue on the same nightly news that his constituents saw. The issue was framed in terms of whether or not the Sandinistas were serious about peace and whether or not the United States should be sending money to mercenaries in Nicaragua when it was cutting basic services at home. During commercial breaks he would likely see an advertisement, supported and perhaps even paid for by groups in his district, arguing against Contra aid. If he went to his office, he could read over the hundreds of hand-written letters from

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<sup>17</sup> Opponents of Contra Aid Plan National Campaign Before Feb 3-4 Vote, News Release, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

constituents politely asking him to stop supporting the Contras. While at his office he would meet with local politicians, clergy, and businessmen who asked him to vote against further aid. These were not the typical activist types that would likely vote against him regardless, these were people he knew well and had influence in the community. While in Washington D.C., he was invited by President Reagan, the leader of his party, to a White House Cabinet Room to hear a pro-Contra presentation by the president, Secretary of State George Shultz, and Assistant Secretary Elliot Abrams. There with nine other House Republicans, he was given a low-key informational presentation on the value of the Contra cause. In the meeting Reagan laid out the terms of the debate without use of invective or excessive emotion, rather he showed the Representatives evidence that Ortega was giving out misinformation regarding complying with the peace treaty. While he hesitated to oppose the leader of his party, Grandy could not ignore the reality of sentiment in his district that was so ably mobilized by NGOs.<sup>18</sup> Amazingly enough, when interviewed by the *Des Moines Register* a week before the vote, Representative Grandy told reporters that he remained undecided. He said that he was holding out for more support for Reagan's plan from other Central American leaders. He told the *Register*, "I realize they may feel restrained in what they can say. I guess I'm looking for a little more courage." The other members of the Iowa delegation needed nothing more from the Central American presidents, however. Six of the other seven members of Congress from Iowa opposed Reagan's proposal, and the seventh, Republican Senator Charles Grassley,

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<sup>18</sup> Grandy won in 1986 with 51% of the vote. His mail was running 70% against Contra aid. Dan Chapman, "Lobby Groups Take Aim at the Undecideds," *Congressional Quarterly*, 30 January 1988.

was leaning toward voting for Contra aid. Grassley acknowledged the pressure that he was under in Iowa to oppose the bill, but continued to weigh the options of removing the pressure on the Sandinistas that only the Contras could provide.<sup>19</sup>

Representative Richard Stallings (D-ID) admitted that lobbying had made a difference in the past. In 1986 Stallings was considered a swing vote when Reagan requested \$100 million of military aid to the Contras. Groups supporting the administration ran newspaper advertisements urging voters to pressure him to back the president. Ironically, especially considering that Stallings was in a district that voted for Reagan at nearly 80%, the letters poured in his office asking him to vote against the Contras at a nearly 2 to 1 ratio. Stallings admitted that this gave him the political cover that he needed to vote his conscience on the matter. Stallings won his district by a slim 133 votes in 1984 and faced another round of advertisements run by pro-Contra groups in his district.<sup>20</sup> However the internal polling done by organizations like Countdown must have given him comfort. The focus groups that Countdown referred to were done in the suburbs of Chicago and Oklahoma City in August 1987. All of the focus groups had an even distribution of Democrats, Republicans, and independents. They did however exclude strong partisans of both parties. The participants were ages 30-50, half women. The samples were all taken from areas that were considered conservative – voting 70% for Reagan in 1984. The focus groups gave this sample of citizens a chance to speak out

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<sup>19</sup> David Westphal, “Iowans Withhold Support for Contra Aid Request,” *Des Moines Register*, 28 January 1988.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Kenworthy, Lobbying on Contra Aid Issue Intensifies, but the Impact May Be Marginal, *Washington Post*, 25 January, 1988.

on the issue, and most of them “expressed powerful antipathy to getting involved in Nicaragua.” They disliked the Contras and Sandinistas equally and were open to suggestions that military action in Nicaragua would be similar to the quagmire of Vietnam.<sup>21</sup> Stalling’s case showed how polling conservative areas and testing key phrases could give Representatives comfort that voting their conscience would not be a political liability. It also gave them phrases to explain their votes to their constituents. Polling done in October showed an overwhelming majority of Americans opposed aid to the Contras while Central American countries were moving toward a peace agreement. Voters also reacted very favorably toward candidates who suggested that government use that money for important projects at home instead.<sup>22</sup>

Representative Carl Pursell (D-MI) also felt the tug from both sides. While at the White House hearing President Reagan and his cabinet members make the case for additional Contra aid, 50 anti-Contra protestors showed up on the lawn of his Michigan office. His press secretary told reporters that the simultaneous lobbying and harassment was a “great illustration of what we’re up against.” House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Texas) provided another option for the wavering swing voters, highlighting a Democratic alternative package that eliminated the lethal aid but kept humanitarian aid flowing to the

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<sup>21</sup> Rosa DeLauro, “Focus Group Results Demonstrate Voters Oppose Contra Aid: Voters Want to Take Care of Problems at Home,” Press Release 27 January 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>22</sup> Rosa DeLaura, “In 10 “Swing” Districts, Voters Say No to Contra Aid,” Press Release 27 January 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66. 64% of respondents opposed Contra aid while Central American countries were demonstrating movement toward a peace agreement. 69% would be inclined to support a candidate who opposed Contra aid in order to spend the money at home.

Contras. Network, a Catholic lobbying group, held a press conference on the hill, decrying the waste of tax dollars and urged lawmakers to oppose continuing an immoral conflict. In light of the no-win situation these members of Congress found themselves looking earnestly toward Nicaragua, hoping that events there would make their decision easier. Representative Mickey Edwards (R-OK), hoping to gather information that would persuade a few of his vacillating colleagues or add credibility to the Administration's case, led a small group of Contra-aid backer to Managua. From Washington it appeared that the Sandinistas talked much more than they acted, but he intended to investigate further.<sup>23</sup>

The Sandinistas did their part to influence swing voters by going through the motions of changing policy. On 28 January officials of the Nicaraguan Government and Contra guerrillas met for their first face-to-face negotiations. Nothing was accomplished other than recital of their respective negotiating position, but Deputy Foreign Minister Victor Hugo Tinoco explained that their chief goal was to force a change in the Contras' position by appealing to the American public to pressure the Reagan administration to change its policy toward Nicaragua.<sup>24</sup> The Sandinista public relations effort continued on

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<sup>23</sup> A.P. "Lobbying Aimed at Swing Vote," General News, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66. Edwards was also incensed at the fact that the Democrats were offering an alternative to the promised "up or down" vote on the Contra aid bill. According to Edwards offering an alternative vote was the same thing as offering an amendment to the bill. This effectively gave wavering members of Congress political cover since they could say that they voted to keep the Contras in the field, but did not vote to give them lethal aid. One could say that they were both for the peace process by opposing lethal aid, but against the Sandinistas by voting to keep the Contras in the field.

<sup>24</sup> James Lemoyne, "Face to Face for Sandinistas and Rebels," *New York Times*, 29 January 1988.

30 January when President Ortega met with Pope John Paul II. The Pope was stern and cool with Ortega, but reaffirmed his support for the peace plan adopted by the five Central American presidents in August. While the Pope did not expressly speak out against American aid to the Contras, his support for the peace process was spun by the Sandinistas as support for their position.<sup>25</sup>

The Reagan administration admittedly turned over every rock and stone for possible votes, seeing the vote as not only a referendum on an issue that Reagan cared deeply about, but also a test of the president's strength on Capitol Hill in the final year of his presidency. Reagan theoretically had the ability to trade votes for projects in specific districts, but his clout on the issue had mostly been used up. Since he had little leverage left to utilize, he chose to water down the bill and emphasize the importance of standing with the Contras against global communism.<sup>26</sup> Hoping to persuade reluctant swing voters on the issue, the administration had not only scaled down its funding requests, but also split up its requests to make the amount seem smaller. The administration's \$36.25 million bill also included authorization to spend money for "passive air defense equipment." This would cost approximately \$1.75 million a month plus \$20 million more to insure the aircraft used to bring supplies to the Contras.<sup>27</sup> However, the cost of the package was less important than the symbolic significance of the bill and the prestige attached to both sides. The swing voters had to decide between supporting a cause they

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<sup>25</sup> Roberto Suro, "Pope Gives Ortega a Cool Reception," *New York Times*, 31 January 1988.

<sup>26</sup> Steven V. Roberts "Reagan Presses Case for Aid to Nicaragua Rebels," *New York Times*, 31 January 1988.

<sup>27</sup> Neil A. Lewis, "Contra Aid Bill," *New York Times*, 1 February 1988.

were unsure about on one hand, and risking being blamed for the advance of communism in Central America on the other. They also had to decide if they wanted to risk letting their party lose prestige by losing a major vote in Congress.

While Reagan hoped to use the prestige of the presidency and the fear of losing another country to communism for his advantage, his party also looked to lobbying groups and grassroots organizations to counter the NGOs on the other side. Citizens for Reagan<sup>28</sup> and the Council for Inter-American Security<sup>29</sup> worked through local political officials, veterans' groups and other organizations to produce direct mailings as well as direct pressure on wavering members of Congress. Citizens for Reagan focused on sending out Nicaragua Action Kits that contained "Free Nicaragua" buttons, bumper stickers, pre-addressed postcards linking Ortega to Cuba's Fidel Castro, and Libya's Muammar el-Qaddafi. They also offered their contacts copies of the slide show compiled by Lt. Colonel Oliver North as a tool to show others the dangers of the Sandinista regime. The Council for Inter-American Security trained their contacts how to convey ideas effectively to their member of Congress as well as editors of their local newspapers. On 29 January they also sent groups of students to Capitol Hill to lobby members and staff.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Citizens for Reagan was a group formed in 1976 to wrest the nomination away from Gerald Ford. Primarily a campaign organization it claimed 100,000 members in 1988.

<sup>29</sup> The Council for Inter-American Security was a combination between public policy research institution and public lobbying firm. It was considered to be an influential part of the "New Right," that came to prominence during the Reagan administration. [http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Council\\_for\\_Inter-American\\_Security](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Council_for_Inter-American_Security)

<sup>30</sup> Dan Chapman, "Lobby Groups Take Aim at the Undecideds," Congressional Quarterly, 30 January 1988.

Anticipating a similar last-minute revelation that sidetracked the vote in December 1987, Countdown released a series of talking points for members of Congress and a 29 page analysis of Colonel Roger Miranda's claims regarding the nature and strength of Sandinista forces and the intentions of the Sandinista government. The talking points focused specifically on the amount and use of the money requested by the Reagan administration. Quoting the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Newsday*, *Newsweek*, Congress, and the International Verification Commission, the talking points emphasized the threat that further Contra aid would pose to the peace process. It directly challenged both the concept and the amount of non-lethal aid that the administration claimed that it needed to keep the Contras in the field. The talking points suggested that that there really was no such thing as non-lethal material aid to an insurgent army, since what was not used for weapons could easily be used for logistics of getting lethal arms into action. The talking points also emphasized that all the representatives of the International Verification Commission had asked all countries to, "Cease providing assistance, military in particular, to the irregular forces operating against the government of Nicaragua."<sup>31</sup> The 29 page analysis of Miranda's claims illustrated both the frustration with past votes and their determination to cover all bases in this particular vote. The Reagan administration had used key defectors like Miranda, eloquent defenders like Oliver North, or the Sandinistas own missteps to thwart frequently the opponents of Contra aid. This time they wanted members of Congress to be prepared. The report made little attempt at being unbiased, but did present a detailed case why the members of Congress

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<sup>31</sup> Rosa DeLauro, Member of Congress: For Your Information, 26 January 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

should not necessarily accept any new revelations from the Reagan administration on the eve of a congressional vote.<sup>32</sup>

With 48 hours left the pressure on the 25-35 swing voters intensified. Representative Bob Clement (D-TN), who had only been in Congress a week, found himself deluged with telephone calls from both interest groups and political leaders. Clement told the *New York Times* that he was for strong national defense, but inclined to only support humanitarian aid for the Contras. Representative Glenn L. English, (D-OK), reported at least 80 telephone calls on one day alone regarding Contra aid. The following day he met with President Reagan at the White House. Representative Barbara Boxer (D-CA) told the *New York Times* that the lobbying intensity was due to the fact that, “Jim Wright’s reputation is on the line.” Speaker Wright met with a continuous stream of house members leading up to the vote. Reagan also invited members of Congress to the White House.

During this last blitz the *New York Times* took note of the army of NGOs who targeted key swing districts. The Times paid special attention to San Francisco based NGO Neighbor to Neighbor, noting that it had more than 35,000 members and had raised \$1 Million to oppose Contra aid. The group used the money to place 27 organizers in more than a dozen Congressional districts and placed 20,000 telephone calls to undecided members of Congress before the vote. Illustrating the very public nature of the lobbying,

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<sup>32</sup> Miranda Warning: A Critical Review of Media and Political Reaction to A Manufactured Sensation. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66. The report was produced by the Seattle Central America Media Project.

the article noted that the NGO specifically targeted Representative Raymond J. McGrath, Republican of Nassau; Wes Watkins and Glenn English, both Democrats of Oklahoma; Olympia J. Snowe, Republican of Maine, and Carl D. Pursell, Republican of Michigan. In the article *Neighbor to Neighbor* predicted a very close vote.<sup>33</sup>

On 1 February both the White House and Congressional Democrats said that the undecided voters in Congress were turning their way. The administration asserted that it might be able to win the vote, while the Democrat majority whip claimed that all of the swing votes who had thus-far made up their minds were against renewed aid.<sup>34</sup>

The presidential candidates also weighed in on Contra aid. Democrat Michael S. Dukakis made Contra aid a central feature of his speech at Drake University as he prepared for the Iowa caucuses. He compared United States involvement in Nicaragua to Vietnam, and encouraged Congress to “stand with the vast majority of the American people and say ‘no, not one more dollar for Contra aid.’” Mr. Dukakis’ stand was not unique in the Democratic field as all candidates opposed Contra aid.<sup>35</sup>

On 2 February 1988 Reagan made a televised address to the nation. It was not covered by the networks<sup>36</sup> but did air live on CNN. He emphasized the connection

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<sup>33</sup> Julie Johnson, “Washington Talk: Congress, Freshman is Tugged by Rival Sides on Rebel Aid,” *New York Times*, 2 February 1988.

<sup>34</sup> Joel Brinkley, “Both Sides on Contra Aid See Vote Shifting Their Way,” *New York Times*, 2 February 1988.

<sup>35</sup> Robin Toner, “Politics; Shifting Style, Dukakis Turns to Emotional Heat,” *New York Times*, 2 February 1988.

<sup>36</sup> Steven V. Roberts, “Reagan, in Speech, Presses Congress on Aid to Contras,” *New York Times*, 3 February 1988. The three major networks claimed that since there was nothing in the speech that had not been said before that they were not going to air the speech. However a new proposal was in the speech, namely that if both houses of

between Nicaraguan freedom and United States security, labeled the Contras freedom fighters, and outlined the details of the proposed aid package. Reagan tied the aid package to the peace process and even offered to keep the amount suspended until March 31 pending the results of the peace process. The Democratic response by Representative Lee Hamilton of Indiana gave two reasons to vote against Reagan's aid request. The first reason was to keep momentum moving forward with the peace process. Representative Hamilton gave credit to the five Central American presidents, Gorbachev, and the Sandinistas for advancing peace and therefore concluded that the United States should encourage these positive steps by cutting off funding for the Contras. Representative Hamilton's second point was that funding the Contras would not win the war but that it would invite more Soviet aid and repression by the Sandinistas.<sup>37</sup>

The advertising put forward by Countdown '87 and allies not only got the attention of the public and elected officials. It was consequential enough to warrant mention by a major paper in Washington D.C. On the morning of the vote the *Washington Times* ran a story on the front page of the Life section documenting the advertisements run by Countdown '87. The story began with the dramatic retelling of the advertisement itself, a battle scene in the Nicaraguan jungle, followed by the name of the local representation and a impassioned plea to contact them and voice their opposition to further funding of the Contras. The article also quoted politicians or their aides who had

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Congress adopt a resolution declaring that the military aid should not be released by March 31 then he would honor that action and withhold the lethal aid.

<sup>37</sup> "Excerpts From Reagan's Address on Aid to Contras and Democratic Reply," *New York Times*, 3 February 1988.

been targeted by the advertisements. Representative Fred Grandy called the advertisements “simplistic,” New York Congressman Raymond McGrath’s press secretary noted that the calls were coming in after the advertisements aired, but that the calls were equally for and against Contra aid. Minnesota Congressman Bill Frenzel’s press secretary said he was receiving significant pressure to vote against funding the Contras. The article also mentioned that several anti-Contra groups had declared a fast from 25 January to 3 Feb to draw attention to the vote, and actor Martin Sheen voiced his opposition to Contra aid. The article also tied Countdown ’87 to various left-wing celebrities and groups, and ended by mocking the ignorance of one Countdown ’87 letter writer who wrote, “No more Contra eight.”<sup>38</sup> While the article was dismissive of the movement and the advertisements, the existence of the article on the morning of the vote spoke to the power of the ad campaign and Countdown ’87. The *Washington Times* was worried about the effectiveness of the advertisements and hoped to score some last-minute political points.

The unprecedented lobbying effort by NGOs and their allies in Congress had certainly gained attention. The effort mixed the traditional approaches of calls, mail, and personal visits, with the bizarre and showy. The organization, Days of Decision, planned a series of events designed to capture the public’s attention. They organized vigils, fasts, draping banners over highway overpasses, and even commissioned a plane to fly over Orange County California towing a banner that read, “Save Lives – No Contra Aid.” Critics and cynics in the press and in political circles questioned the effectiveness of the

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<sup>38</sup> Don Kowet, “Countdown ’87 Ads Target Swing Votes on Contra Aid,” *Washington Times*, 3 February 1988.

lobbyists on these issues. Certainly most of the Congress had a firm position on the issue and no one wanted to admit that they changed their minds due to a group of activists sending mail to their congressional office. However the NGOs against Contra aid believed they had a legitimate strategy. Their mix of quality polling, committed volunteers, and ability to convince influential people in their community to personally visit their member of Congress was sure to have some impact, and since the vote was very close a small impact could change United States foreign policy. George Miller (D-CA) believed that the grassroots activity could make a critical difference, he told the Washington Post, “I’ve had several members we’ve targeted come to me and complain that their people are getting agitated. I told them, ‘that’s the point.’”<sup>39</sup>

As part of their effort to draw attention to their cause and present further pressure on Democrat swing voters, Countdown '87 was able to secure a joint press release from all seven Democratic presidential candidates. The press release stuck to the familiar themes of the Countdown campaign. They mentioned the historic opportunity to help the peace process, the failed policy of Ronald Reagan, and their preference to spend money on needed projects at home. Perhaps directed at those swing voters in Congress, the seven candidates said, “President Oscar Arias and the other Central American presidents have stood behind the peace process. We are encouraged by the progress the five nations have made thus far in their efforts to bring peace to the region. While much remains to be

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<sup>39</sup> Tom Kenworthy, Lobbying on Contra Aid Issue Intensifies but the Impact May be Marginal, *The Washington Post*, 25 January 1988.

accomplished, we respect their beliefs that cessation of U.S. aid to the Contras will assist the process.”<sup>40</sup>

In the Countdown field plan between 28 January and 3 February, the staff and NGO-led volunteers were to do five things. First they were to use the phone banks to get 500 commitments to call the Congressperson by midnight Monday 1 February. Second, confirm that the second half of the opinion leaders in the community had contacted their Congressperson by phone. Third, make sure that the appointed opinion leader submits an op-ed to the local press by 28 January. Fourth, work to see that any left over opiniongrams were released on 28 January. Finally, the staff member was to confirm that the last op-ed by the opinion leader was printed in the local press. Then all the volunteers could do was to sit and wait for the vote. Only then could they hold their final press event either thanking or criticizing the member for their vote.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Rosa DeLauro, “All Seven Democratic Presidential Candidates Oppose Contra Aid Bill,” Press Release 2 February 1988. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66. The seven candidates were Bruce Babbitt, Michael Dukakis, Richard Gephardt, Albert Gore, Jr., Gary Hart, Jesse Jackson, and Paul Simon.

<sup>41</sup> Countdown ’87 Field Plan, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66. Countdown was very specific on how the letters of the editor should be sent. They did not want letters to be sent from “people who write to the editor often or from people perceived as “kooky” by the public.

## CHAPTER 10

### FINAL WORDS AND FINAL VOTES

On 2 February 1988 Ronald Reagan addressed the nation concerning aid to the Contras. He began by touting the success of the efforts of the people of El Salvador to resist a communist insurgency. He then referred to a map of Central America, noting that the countries of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica were all friendly and democratic. Reagan warned the American public of the danger of allowing a Soviet-supported Communist Nicaragua to reverse the trend of democratization in the region. Linking Nicaragua to Cuba, Libya, and most importantly the Soviet Union, Reagan asserted that the Nicaraguan government threatened both the Panama Canal and Mexico, and therefore the national security of the United States. The logical course of action was to support the democratic resistance (the Contras) in Nicaragua. Reagan characterized the Contras as tenacious and successful freedom fighters who deserved the United States continued support. Reagan pointed to his administration's record of seeking peace bilaterally, multilaterally, and in other diplomatic settings, all however within the context of insisting that the Sandinistas change their communist trajectory. Reagan acknowledged the important step that the Guatemala peace plan represented. He pointed out that the Sandinistas had made only limited steps in fulfilling the peace plan and that the best way to insure that they complied fully was to keep the pressure on them by continuing to support the Contras. Next Reagan drew attention to the vote in the House of Representatives. He highlighted the \$36 million dollar bill: specifically the ninety percent would be used for nonlethal support. Even though the lethal support was not guaranteed to be used, Reagan promised to suspend that additional money until March 31<sup>st</sup> when the

Sandinista compliance would be evaluated by his administration with help from the Congress and the democratic presidents of Central America. In a clear admission of the difficulty he was having in getting this bill through Congress, he admitted that he had been meeting with many members of Congress to discuss his proposal. He announced that in the spirit of bipartisanship,

I will, tomorrow, send a letter to the congressional leadership taking a further step. At the appropriate time, I will invite Congress to act by what is called a sense of Congress resolution on the question of whether the Government of Nicaragua is in compliance with the San Jose declaration. If Congress adopts such a resolution within 10 days containing this finding, then I will honor this action and withhold deliveries of ammunition (lethal aid) in this package.

This clear concession on the eve of the vote represented the admission that Reagan did not believe that he had enough votes to pass his bill. The rest of the speech connected the Sandinistas to communism in general and the Soviets in particular, listed their human rights abuses, and argued for support for the Contras in the same manner that we supported Afghanistan freedom fighters and the government in El Salvador. Reagan also made reference to Miranda and the revelations that cast doubt on Sandinista's promises to fulfill the provisions in the Guatemala peace accord as well as the United States earlier folly of ignoring Soviet connections in the Carter administration. Finally, Reagan argued that the historic United States foreign policy of containment had shown its limits in dealing with the island nation of Cuba, and therefore should not be applied for a mainland country like Nicaragua.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Aid to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance," 2 February 1988, CQ 6 February 1988, p 270-273.

The democratic response delivered by Representative Lee Hamilton (D-IN) focused on the peace process that had been initiated by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias. Hamilton argued that the six-month-old peace process had made more progress in advancing freedom in Nicaragua than had been accomplished in seven years of Contra war. Hamilton specifically pointed out the increased freedom of the press, the release of some political prisoners, and indirect talks with the Contras that had already taken place. Hamilton also drew attention to the concessions that the Sandinistas had already agreed to, namely to hold municipal and regional elections, a suspension of the six-year-old state of emergency, and the agreement to hold direct cease-fire talks with the Contras and a subsequent broad political amnesty. Hamilton believed that these concessions put the Sandinistas on the right path. The Congressman also took a moment to agree with the objectives set forth by Speaker Wright and President Reagan concerning Central America. He believed those goals would be best achieved by allowing the Sandinistas and Soviets an opportunity to fulfill their promises. While Hamilton admitted that there was risk in this type of approach, but believed there was less risk in working for peace than continuing a war “we can neither predict nor control.” Hamilton argued that Reagan’s aid request was not enough to win the war, but enough to sabotage the peace process and erode our influence in Latin America. In conclusion Hamilton commented on the additional cost of continuing to support the Contras,

Those with the most at stake here are not Americans, but the ordinary people of Central America who will have to fight and die if war continues. Forty thousand in Nicaragua have died already. My guess is that the people of Central America want us to keep trying, and take risks for peace.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lee Hamilton, “Take Risks for Peace and Vote Against Aid for Contras,” 2 February 1988. CQ 6 February 1988. Page 273.

The debate on the floor of the House of Representatives lasted over ten hours before the vote on 3 February, in order to give everyone ample opportunity to make remarks on record. The debate was intense at times, occasionally humorous, and often interrupted by howls of protest from the gallery. Perhaps illustrative of the pressure that many of the Representatives from key swing districts were under, few of those Representatives rose to explain their decision and rationale, or simply to insert them later into the Congressional record.

The speeches largely followed the pattern established by years of arguing over funding. The dueling paradigms of right and left traded shots in predictable fashion. The right insisted on opposing communism to arrest its spread and pointed to human rights abuses by the thuggish Sandinistas. Some members quoted from the Sandinista creed that they allegedly had to subscribe to before taking an active part in the government, which stated, “I believe in the doctrines and struggles of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Che Guevera, the great teachers and guides of the working class, which is the protective force and driving force of the class struggle. I believe in the building of the Marxist-Leninist society.”<sup>3</sup> Others pointed to the connections between the Sandinistas and Soviets, quoting defector Roger Miranda, or the Sandinistas themselves perhaps hoping to jar the swing voters back to the correct side of the cold war. The old paradigm of losing countries to communism through inaction or appeasement had not lost its grip on the reasoning of members of Congress. Understanding the strength of that argument and hoping to undermine it, Countdown had preempted references to Roger Miranda and had provided

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<sup>3</sup> Representative Richard Ray (D-GA), H 111, 3 February 1988.

interested Representatives with a detailed analysis of his testimony and the suspicious circumstances regarding his previous appearances on the Hill. The opposition to Contra aid hoped that his usefulness as a backer of Contra aid had been sufficiently lessened.

The left, which had been countering what it referred to as red baiting for years, came back with pieces of evidence that fit the anti-Vietnam paradigm. Like the “unwinnable” war in South East Asia, the Nicaraguan effort was thought to be a quagmire. Those in opposition to Reagan’s proposal highlighted the ineffectiveness of the program and referred to it as a waste of money, lives, as well as a waste of United States prestige in the region. With the help of NGOs, who had written a letter in opposition to Reagan’s proposal to be inserted into the Congressional Record,<sup>4</sup> Representatives also

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<sup>4</sup> The statement was introduced by Representative Louise Slaughter (D-NY) and was as follows:

#### A STATEMENT ON CONTRA AID

We, the undersigned religious leaders, urge Congress to defeat any proposed new aid to the armed Nicaraguan opposition known as the Contras.

As men and women of faith who have leadership responsibilities within our religious bodies, we seek United States policies in Central America that are consistent with a deep sense of morality and justice, policies that rely upon diplomacy rather than the force of arms. We support the Guatemala peace accords and the ongoing peace process in the region. Sending additional aid to the Contras in any form or any amount would violate the Central American peace plan and Contravene the expressed wishes of President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica. The immoral Contra war policy must finally be ended.

[\*H153] We ask all Senators and Representatives to vote against the request for new aid to the Contras on February 3 and 4.

This statement was signed by over one-hundred leaders representing over a dozen different churches and denominations including: Church of the Brethren, American Baptist, Evangelical Lutheran, United Methodist, United Church of Christ, Roman Catholic Church, Christian Church, Unitarian Universalist, Hebrew Congregations, Presbyterian Church USA, Moravian Church, and the Episcopal Church.

called the war immoral and the continuing funding for the Contras a betrayal of the peace process. Relying on the time-tested subject of Vietnam, the Representatives against the aid referred to the failed war often and expressed their desire to avoid another quagmire.

There is no evidence to suggest that the last minute speeches did or did not change any minds, but we do know that several Representatives remained undecided until the morning of the vote. The presented arguments provide insight into what each Representative found particularly convincing amid the mountains of evidence presented by both sides in the debate. Of particular interest to this work is the fact that Representatives from both sides used information gathered by NGOs as evidence for the other side's human rights abuses. Many of them entered the accounts given to them or verified by NGOs active in the debate. The following was entered by Representative Peter DeFazio (D-OR) which was typical of the type of eye-witness material presented against the case for Contra aid:

Jinotega, Nicaragua,  
January 21, 1988.

Greetings from the mountains of northern Nicaragua. We hope that the winter snows have been at least a little enjoyable for you. For us it remains warm in temperature but hotter than usual with respect to the war.

As described in our Dec. 7 and Jan. 10 newsletters, difficulties with life in general and health work in particular have dramatically increased over the past months. As you know, Congress will soon make a critical decision regarding the future of this impoverished but proud country. When we spoke with you in D.C. last fall, we described from our own experiences war crimes of the Contra including violations of medical neutrality and atrocities against civilians. We also related how the terror perpetrated by the Contra disrupts nearly all aspects of normal life in the north and how it is slowly strangling the society, retarding recent advances in health and other social services.

It is clear since our time in the States that the Contra have not changed in their behavior. We will briefly cite several newly reported incidents in our region

which we have confirmed with Witness for Peace and the Catholic Church. Two more health posts have been attacked. On Oct. 9, the health center in Mancotal was robbed during a Contra attack, it had been completely burned in the May attack. On Jan. 5, the health clinic near Pancasan was ransacked, riddled with bullets and partially burned. a 14 year old girl was kidnapped during that attack. This brings to ten the number of health centers subject to deliberate attacks in the last 12 months in our health region. A 23 year old nurse from Yali died this winter after being in a coma for more than a month from injuries received in one of several random mortar attacks on northern municipalities. Since November 1st, 3 ambulances have been attacked, 2 in our region. In the Dec. 20 attack, both the patient and attending physician, Dr. Eric Pineda, died. Though the administration may want the Contra to change, they remain the brutal terrorists that they have always been, with wanton disregard for medical and civilian neutrality. We hope this information will be helpful, please relate it to Rep. DeFazio. As medical personnel working to promote life, this policy of death is abhorrent. It's criminal manifestations violate the ideals of America.

Thank you for your concern.

Sincerely,  
Susan Cooksan, M.D.  
Tim Takaro, M.D., M.P.H.  
Jinotega, Nicaragua<sup>5</sup>

Acknowledging their reputation and credibility as sources, Representative Mickey Edwards (R-OK) had his own set of NGOs to refer to in the middle of his direct plea for the undecided voters to side with President Reagan's proposal:

And the second question is simply whether the Contras help that process along or hurt it? Speaker after speaker here today has said that to support the Contras is to destroy the peace process. But that is not what the Nicaraguans say. That is not what the Catholic Church, which is overseeing the negotiations, says. That is not what the labor union leaders say. That is not what the Commission on Human Rights says. That is not what the shopkeepers say. That is not what the political opposition says. That is not what the mothers of the tortured political prisoners say. That is not what the editors say.

No, the Nicaraguans, who have seen their Government walk out of the Contadora talks, who have seen their Government promise amnesty and deliver exile, who

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<sup>5</sup> Representative Peter DeFazio (D-OR), 3 February 1988, Congressional Record--House.

have seen their Government promise freedom and then unleash the young Turbas to threaten them and beat them, who have seen the Sandinistas smile for the United States, and then fly to Moscow, no, these people, the church, the press, the unions, the human rights monitors, they do not understand how we can fall for the same trick over and over and over again.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the evidence presented by those who had long been convinced of a certain side, the arguments presented by the previously undecided also are worth examining. The following summaries of speeches by the representatives from the key swing districts give us insight into what they were thinking about the day of the vote.

Representative John Miller (R-WA), reflecting on the intense pressure put on him by NGOs in his district began his speech by admitting, “Mr. Chairman, we have been told that there may be great personal political risks in the votes we cast here today. But these risks pale beside those faced by President Arias, by the other Central American Presidents and by the Nicaraguan people.” Miller noted the recent progress in Nicaragua, namely that, “President Ortega had been spending time at the negotiating table instead of in Moscow.” Miller clearly believed that despite the pressure put on him by the NGOs in his district, supporting the Contras was in the best interest of the country. He believed that to stop supporting the Contras would be making unilateral concessions.<sup>7</sup>

Representative Frenzel (R-MN), also targeted by Countdown as a key swing vote, noted the focus on national attention on the issue and admitted that he had a hard time deciding which way to vote. He stated,

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<sup>6</sup> Representative Mickey Edwards (R-OK), 3 February 1988, Congressional Record – House.

<sup>7</sup> Representative John Miller (R-WA), 3 February 1988, Congressional Record – House.

My own experiences have persuaded me of the intensity of anti-Contra feeling. Those feelings are genuine and must be considered carefully. American(s) don't want to finance warfare or violence. Opponents of this bill fervently want the peace plan to work, and believe the Contras hinder that plan. However, the Ortega Government is, by most accounts, repressive, and not much given to living up to promises.

Frenzel believed that the Sandinistas had made significant concessions but that they had done so because of the pressure put on them because of the Contras and in hopes of influencing this vote. Therefore, against the wishes of his district, Frenzel said, "I have reluctantly concluded that a vote for Contra funding is better than one against." Based on his speech it seems likely that Reagan's last minute concession of involving Congress in the decision to go forward with the ten percent of the funding for lethal aid tipped the balance for Frenzel.<sup>8</sup> Representative Gunderson (R-WI) also mentioned the concession by Reagan as he affirmed sending further military aid to the Contras.<sup>9</sup> Representative Gradison (R-OH) mentioned the deep division of the country over the issue, but believed that the Contras were a necessary element in moving the Sandinistas toward democracy.<sup>10</sup> Representative Amo Houghton (R-NY) stated that he was voting against the bill because of the Arias peace plan. Representative Jim Slattery (D-KS) echoed many of the statements put forward by Countdown arguing that the United States should not violate the Arias Peace Plan. Slattery also asked that the United States exhaust the diplomatic

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<sup>8</sup> Representative Bill Frenzel (R-MN), 3 February 1988, Congressional Record – House.

<sup>9</sup> Representative Steve Gunderson (R-WI), 3 February 1988, Congressional Record – House.

<sup>10</sup> Representative Willis Gradison Jr. (R-OH), 3 February 1988, Congressional Record – House.

remedies before resorting to a military solution.<sup>11</sup> Representative Thomas Carper (D-DE) admitted that the President’s “11<sup>th</sup>-hour decision to seek a sense of the Congress resolution before releasing this package’s lethal aid” was a positive step. However Carper still objected and, perhaps reflecting Countdown’s data that suggested that the humanitarian aid in the package was not truly non-lethal, said that “the package is both bigger and less humanitarian than it appears to be.” Carper suggested that any undecided member left vote against this plan in favor of continuing to observe the peace process unfold.<sup>12</sup> Representative Pursell (R-MI) avoided the topic altogether and did not mention which way he was going to vote. Instead he called for a bipartisan agreement that pledged itself to the goals of the Arias peace plan as well as a full-fledged partnership with Central America.<sup>13</sup>

The closing debate on Contra funding on 3 February illustrates the importance of the strategy employed by Countdown’s campaign. According to Representatives speaking on the floor, some members of Congress remained undecided up to the morning of the vote. Several of the swing voters mentioned Reagan’s address to the Nation on 2 February and specifically his last minute concession to congress on the release of military

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<sup>11</sup> Representative Jim Slattery (D-KS), 3 February 1988, Congressional Record – House.

<sup>12</sup> Representative Thomas Carper (D-DE), 3 February 1988, Congressional Record – House.

<sup>13</sup> Representative Carl Pursell (R-MI), 3 February 1988, Congressional Record – House. Although you could not have determined his opinion on the matter based on his comments alone, Pursell voted with the President for Contra aid.

funding.<sup>14</sup> It may have turned the tide for the pro-Contra-aid forces had Countdown not anticipated some last minute concession of some sort. Based on the surprises that had defeated them in the past they prepared for as many contingencies as they could, including educating their field staff and interested members of Congress about the reality of the proposed humanitarian aid and alternate interpretations of Roger Miranda's data.

Following the debate the House of Representatives narrowly voted down renewed funding for the Contras. The vote was 219 to 211 including 12 Republicans joining the 207 Democrats voting against the bill and 47 Democrats siding with President Reagan and 164 Republicans. The White House expressed disappointment, the majority whip called it a "victory for peace." Countdown called it a "momentous step toward peace and stability in Central America."<sup>15</sup> However it was framed, direct military funding for Contras in the Reagan administration was over.<sup>16</sup> In a symbolic gesture on 4 February the Senate voted to support Reagan's aid request by a margin of 51 to 48 including 12 Democratic Senators who voted to support the measure. The vote was a politically safe one as Senators could support Reagan without actually sending aid to the Contras.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Congressional Quarterly reported that it convinced swing vote Representative Owen Pickett (D-VA) to support the President's proposal. It also convinced Sen. Nancy Kassebaum (R-KS) to side with the President. Vol 46, No 6, 6 February 1988, Page 238.

<sup>15</sup> Countdown Campaign Newsletter, 10 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>16</sup> The last major House vote on Contra aid was in June 1986 when they approved a \$100 million military and logistical aid package for the Contras. That vote was 221 to 209, with 51 Democrats voting in support of the president and 11 Republicans voting against. Julie Johnson, "House, By 8 Votes, Defeats Rebel Aid; A Loss for Reagan," *New York Times* 4 February 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Julie Johnson, "Senate, by 51-48 Vote, Backs Reagan Aid Request for the Contras," *New York Times*, 5 February 1988.

The vote in the House of Representatives was fundamentally along party and regional lines. Most opposition to Contra aid came from northern and western Democrats. The south accounted for 42 of 51 Democrats that voted for Reagan's plan, and nearly half of the 86 voting Democrats from the south.<sup>18</sup> All but five Democrats outside the South opposed Contra aid. All southern and western Republicans supported Contra aid. The 12 Republicans who opposed the aid came from the Northeast and upper Midwest. The Senate vote, which Reagan won 51-48 (Joe Biden, in the hospital, would have voted against aid) was not nearly as partisan. 12 Democrats voted for the bill and 7 Republican crossed party lines to oppose the bill. While they lost the vote, Countdown considered it a small victory that Senators Alan Dixon (D-IL) and Bill Bradley (D-NJ) had voted against Contra aid for the first time.<sup>19</sup>

The mood was celebratory for those who opposed Contra aid. Countdown '87 rhetorically asked their supporters, "Doesn't it feel good to win one?" However, they also prepared their staff and volunteers for the Democratic counter-proposal to follow in the last weeks of February. The Democrats in the house did not want to simply defeat the bill and leave themselves vulnerable politically if the situation in Nicaragua worsened. They wanted to avoid a scenario where the only course available in Nicaragua was a military one. Several members of Congress also agreed to vote against this aid package if they could vote for an alternative package at a later time. Finally, the Democrats running for

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<sup>18</sup> Speaker Jim Wright is not included in this tally because he did not traditionally vote unless there was a tie.

<sup>19</sup> Countdown Campaign Newsletter, 10 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

president wanted to be able to point toward a constructive alternative to Reagan's military proposals. Countdown '87 promised to fight on against any sort of aid whether disguised as humanitarian aid or not. It reasserted its desire to oppose any sort of aid that did not flow directly to civilians and through a neutral third party like NGO International Red Cross or the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees. Countdown '87 also recommended that the crafters of the alternative aid package consider detailed recommendations made by NGOs familiar with the conditions on the ground regarding how to move forward with the peace process.<sup>20</sup>

As people on both sides of the debate sorted through the details of the house vote to stop United States military aid to the Contras, they began to assign credit and/or blame. Representative George Miller, chairman of the Countdown '87 Campaign, released an immediate press release after the vote, announcing: "This vote sounds the death knell to the misguided and destructive foreign policy of the Reagan Administration in Central America." Miller also spoke highly of the peace process spearheaded by Costa Rican president Oscar Arias and proudly announced that the United States was now in compliance.<sup>21</sup> Beyond celebrating the legislative victory Miller credited Countdown '87 as decisive in the decision of at least six swing-vote members to vote no on aid. That number was two more than were needed to defeat Contra aid in the 3 February House vote. According to Countdown, several of the targeted swing legislators who eventually

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<sup>20</sup> Countdown Campaign Newsletter, 10 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>21</sup> Rosa DeLauro, Rep. George Miller, Chair of Countdown '87 Campaign, Lauds Defeat of Contra Aid Wednesday Night, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

opposed aid were also barometers for other members on the issue, which indicates that the six changed votes might have been even more significant than it first appeared.<sup>22</sup>

The role of Countdown '87's influence, and therefore the role of NGOs who were an integral part, in the 3 February vote may be complex and difficult to measure, but they are still compelling. Several sources directly testified to Countdown's influence on key swing voters. Representative Miller explained Countdown's success in a letter to Rosa DeLauro,

Countdown '87 quickly became an integral part of congressional strategies to defeat Contra funding. Countdown mounted an impressive grassroots lobbying operation and established a credible presence in "swing" districts – precisely those areas where we need support to defeat Contra aid. Members of Congress who have long opposed the Contras felt a new burst of support from the lobbying networks. At the same time, members "on the fence" began to listen more and more to their constituents back home as it became more likely that the President's personal popularity alone would no longer assure victory in the Congress. In those instances, our work was particularly timely and important.

Majority Leader Thomas Foley (D-WA) told DeLauro that Countdown had produced one of the most effective citizen efforts that he had seen. He wrote to DeLauro,

...that Members of many key districts have received more mail from constituents, more phone calls from close friends, more pressure from advisors, than ever before. This is a direct product of Countdown's work for the broad citizen's movement against the Contras.<sup>23</sup>

Majority Whip Tony Coelho (D-CA) believed that they had made a dramatic difference, saying,

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<sup>22</sup> Representatives Aspin (D-WI), Carper (D-DE), Slattery (D-KS) and Senator Dixon (D-IL) were all pointed out by Countdown and George Miller as key barometers for other members on the issue. Field Operations, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66/Countdown 87.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Foley, Letter to Rosa DeLauro, 22 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

Countdown '87 has given voice to the overwhelming citizen opposition across the country to the Contra war in Central America. Through its educational and organizational efforts, Countdown '87 dramatically increased principled opposition to the Contra policy in key swing districts. Members of Congress have spoken to me about an upsurge in publicity in their districts for the Arias plan and against further funding for the Contras in recent months. In sum, Countdown's efforts made a substantial and significant difference for those of us who have been trying to change Administration policy here in Congress.<sup>24</sup>

Deputy Majority Whip David Bonior (D-MI) also believed that Countdown played a significant role. He specifically noted their organizational prowess and moral strength of the organization:

I am especially appreciative of the coordinating role Countdown played in the coalition of groups that has been working so long and so hard to end this war. Your political sophistication and experience in running campaigns was a welcome addition to the moral imperative many of these groups bring to the issue.<sup>25</sup>

Ira Arlook, Executive Director of NGO Citizen Action<sup>26</sup> gave high praise to Countdown calling it the "best I've ever seen of its kind," Arlook commended the strategy of the campaign:

Countdown '87 concentrated its efforts in some of the most politically difficult Congressional districts. It enlisted experienced organizers in key areas which had never before been mobilized to this extent, or on this issue. Organizers were

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<sup>24</sup> Tony Coelho, Letter to Rosa DeLauro, 2 March 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>25</sup> David Bonior, Letter to Rosa DeLauro, 24 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>26</sup> Citizen Action was a umbrella group comprising of Campaign California, Citizens Action Coalition of Indiana, Colorado Citizen Action Network, Connecticut Citizen Action Group, Florida Consumers Federation, Idaho Fair Share, Illinois Public Action Council, Iowa Citizen Action Network, Maryland Citizen Action Coalition, Massachusetts Fair Share, Maine People's Alliance, Minnesota COACT, Missouri Citizen labor Coalition, new Hampshire People's Alliance, New Jersey Citizen Action, Ohio Public Interest Campaign, Oregon Fair Share, Pennsylvania Public Interest Coalition, Rhode Island Community Labor Coalition, Virginia Action, Washington Fair Share, West Virginia Citizen Action Group, and Wisconsin Action Coalition.

supplied with a superb field plan, crucial background information on the Contra aid issue, and constant support and direction from your office in Washington. The weekly mailings you sent kept them up to date on relevant happenings in Congress. The results of the district polling you commissioned reinforced the belief that the public strongly opposes Contra aid. Extensive press coverage of the poll data heartened organizers and had an impact on crucial swing votes, as did the radio and TV advertising in the week before the vote.<sup>27</sup>

David Reed, Executive Director of NGO Coalition for a New Foreign Policy<sup>28</sup>

complimented Countdown on its victory, saying, “The House defeat on February 3<sup>rd</sup> of the President’s request for more aid to the Contras was due in large measure to the united

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<sup>27</sup> Ira Arlook, Letter to Rosa DeLauro, 22 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>28</sup> Coalition for a New Foreign Policy was an umbrella organization made up of the following organizations: American Baptist Churches U.S.A. National Ministries, American Committee on Africa, American Ethical Union, American Friends Service Committee, American Medical Students Association, American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Americans for Democratic Action, Center for International Policy, Center of Concern, Church of the Brethren – Washington Office, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Department of Church and Society, Church Women United, Clergy and Laity Concerned, Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, Council on Hemispheric Affairs, Democratic Socialists of America, Episcopal Peace Fellowship, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Friends committee on National legislation, Friends of the Earth, Friends of the Filipino People, Gray Panthers, Institute for Food and Development Policy, Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Peace Section, Movement for a Free Philippines, national Assembly of Religious Women, National Association of Social Workers, National Council of Churches, National Federation of Priests’ Councils USA, National Office of Jesuit Social Ministries, NETWORK, New Jewish Agenda, North American Federation of Temple Youth, OXFAM America, Pax Christi – U.S.A., Presbyterian Church (USA), Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, Quixote Center, SANE/FREEZE, Sisters of Mercy of the Union, Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Unitarian Universalist Association, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, United Church of Christ – Board of Global Ministries – Women’s Division, United States Student Association, War Resisters League, Washington Office of the Episcopal Church, Washington Office on Africa, Washington Office on Latin America, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Women Strike for Peace, World Federalist Association, World Peacemakers, Young Women’s Christian Association of the U.S.A.

opposition of the human rights community. The work of Countdown '87 was a vital part of that effort."<sup>29</sup> Jean Walsh, Director of NGO Witness for Peace, believed that the vote denying the Contras additional aid would have been impossible without Countdown.

Walsh wrote Countdown after the vote:

On February 3 we won by 8 votes. We all wish that it had been 30. But of those 8 votes, 4 were Countdown districts. To my knowledge I do not know of any other national effort on Contra aid that can point to such clear cut results. Those four votes made the difference of winning and losing.<sup>30</sup>

Beth Brunton's, of Central America Peace Campaign,<sup>31</sup> comments were representative of the convictions expressed to Countdown by many small NGOs across the country, when she told DeLauro that they believed Countdown's work as critical to blocking Contra aid in 1988. They saw themselves as an important part of the effort but realized that they could not have made a difference without the expertise, funding, and national connections that Countdown provided.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond the testimonials, those evaluating the successful campaign believed that Countdown took advantage of a unique historical opportunity. Miller credited the Arias peace plan, the leadership of Speaker Wright, and the ongoing public opposition to Contra funding as all instrumental in putting the Reagan administration on the defensive. This unique historical moment was seized by the anti-Contra aid coalition in which

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<sup>29</sup> David Reed, Letter to Rosa DeLauro, 22 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Walsh, Letter to Countdown, 22 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>31</sup> NGO operating in Washington State. They had both a Spokane and Seattle Office.

<sup>32</sup> Beth Brunton, Letter to Rosa DeLauro, 16 February 1988. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

Countdown played a major role.<sup>33</sup> Representative Thomas Foley concurred, noting that the Guatemala peace plan provided the hope and United States public opinion, spearheaded by Countdown, insured that the peace process could move forward. Majority Whip Tony Coelho gave Countdown even more credit, giving the umbrella organization credit for beginning serious talk about a viable alternative to Reagan's military aid which flowered in public due to the Reagan-Wright peace proposal, the Guatemala agreement, and the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Arias.<sup>34</sup> Even before the vote was cast, it was clear that the grassroots pressure put significant pressure on the Reagan administration. Reagan was forced to delay votes and radically decrease the amount of military support for the Contras. The delaying tactics and altered proposals were subsequently thwarted by Countdown's effective educational campaigns and central coordination of the numerous NGOs pressuring members of Congress in local districts.

Those looking at the vote also noted the national attention that Countdown '87 was able to gain during the campaign. Countdown '87 managed to rise above the weaknesses of traditional local campaigns and raise enough funds to go national. Countdown '87's credible polling and commercials aired in influential media markets were particularly effective in gaining both press and legislator's attention.<sup>35</sup> The polling proved that American people overwhelmingly opposed aiding the Contras and helped

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<sup>33</sup> George Miller, Letter to Rosa DeLauro, 22 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>34</sup> Tony Coelho, Letter to Rosa DeLauro, 2 March 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Foley, Letter to Rosa DeLauro, 22 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

convince key swing voters that voting for Contra aid involved a significant political risk. The information gathered by Countdown also supported and encouraged wavering members to oppose a popular president's requests.<sup>36</sup> Jean Walsh of Witness for Peace believed this mix of national and local efforts made the key difference. She told Countdown, "Never before has there been such a comprehensive media strategy involving national and grassroots media...I believe that is what made the difference in changing or holding Members votes."<sup>37</sup> Smaller NGOs like Central America Peace Campaign specifically thanked Countdown for making a critical difference in their work. The organization stated:

First, we could not have devoted the level of staff and activity without your financial support. Your contributions enabled us to hire experienced, professional staff and to free their time for organizing instead of fundraising. Your support helped us keep growing as the vote was delayed rather than having to cut back as in prior votes...Next, we appreciated the excellent, continual flow of information about the status of legislation and background on the issues. Your field staff regularly sent us news clippings, model letters, and ways to answer hard questions which were very helpful. For local groups, it is often very difficult if not impossible to get advance notice on votes and insider information to make an impact. Your staff's frequent phone calls helped us plan and act with advance notice.<sup>38</sup>

Those on the other side of the issue also admitted the power of public opinion regarding the vote. Looking back at that vote Representative Ike Skelton (D-MO) stated, "...public opinion did cause us to lose a handful of votes in that February vote as result of

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<sup>36</sup>David Bonior, Letter to Rosa DeLauro, 24 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Walsh, Letter to Countdown, 22 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>38</sup> Beth Brunton, Letter to Rosa DeLauro, 16 February 1988. Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

the odor (how bad things were going on the ground in Nicaragua). I think public opinion probably cost us that vote, or at least gave people a reason or an excuse to vote against it who were inclined to do so.”<sup>39</sup> It was not just because public opinion was against supporting the Contras: the strength of the Countdown campaign was its ability to mobilize that public opinion in an authentic grassroots way. Members of Congress tend to ignore protestors from out of their district or from people who protest on a regular basis.

Ira Arlook of Citizen Action noted the difference with this campaign:

In the past, peace and progressive organizations concentrated on traditional constituencies to influence a legislator. The Countdown '87 tactic of pinpointing the most powerful members of the swing legislator's community and convincing them to express their opposition to Contra aid was highly effective, and is certain to be used in the future. Never before have so many moderate Democrats, Republicans, and business leaders – people who have influence with the swing legislators – spoken out against Contra aid.<sup>40</sup>

David Reed of Coalition for a New Foreign Policy concurred, saying that,

The high level of sophistication in legislative matters combined with a creative grassroots strategy made Countdown '87's contribution essential. The work in organizing and mobilizing the grassroots in several key swing districts resulted in important individual victories.<sup>41</sup>

This high degree of sophistication and innovation enabled the Countdown directed NGOs to bring public opinion to bear on a historically difficult issue like foreign policy.

Directed public pressure enables the protestors to transform members of Congress from representatives to delegates on a specific issue. A representative is elected to express their

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<sup>39</sup> Sobel, *Public Opinion and Contra Aid*, 250.

<sup>40</sup> Ira Arlook, Letter to Rosa DeLauro, 22 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

<sup>41</sup> David Reed, Letter to Rosa DeLauro, 22 February 1988, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66.

opinion and vote their conscience. A delegate tends to vote according to public opinion polls. According to published studies, anecdotes in the press, and information gleaned from congressional records,<sup>42</sup> members of Congress carefully monitor public opinion in their districts and are concerned with the direction and intensity of that opinion. That opinion influences the vote of the representative if the representative believes a particular issue is not only important to you or your organization but that it will influence how you vote the next time around. Historically foreign policy does not often rise to that level of voter concern. Part of the reason for this is general ignorance of the public. The situation in Nicaragua was difficult for the ordinary voter to understand. Most Americans were ignorant of the contemporary issues in Nicaragua, not to mention the long pattern of United States involvement in Nicaragua. This gave Representatives more room to navigate, when voting on the issue because they operated under the assumption that the average voter in their district did not understand the issue enough to form an informed opinion and therefore should lean on their representative's expertise. When Republican Congressman Mickey Edwards (R-OK) was asked why public opinion did not change his

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Sobel, *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy*, 270-1. Sobel interviewed a number of members of Congress for his work and observed that they started out talking about voting their conscience but ended up typically voting as a delegate if the opinion was expressed in a focused way and if they believed it was not just coming from the "usual suspects." It is apparent from the dozens of newspaper articles read for this project that the members of Congress interviewed by the press are very aware of public sentiment on foreign policy issues – namely they typically know the number of letters they have received and the percentages for and against their position (all three Representatives that were featured in the extensive discussion in the final chapter of Sobel's work quoted the number or percentages of letters received on the Contra issue). This fact certainly explains why organizations expended great effort to write letters and employ traditional lobbying methods during the Contra aid debate – to some extent it worked.

vote regarding Contra aid, he pointed to polls that showed that the public did not understand the issue. He said:

When you try to determine where the public was on issues like Nicaragua, it depends a lot on how you ask the questions. There was a Los Angeles Times poll in which the participants were asked not about a specific conflict, but about their view of communism in general. And 69 percent said that they would support U.S. military action including the use of U.S. troops to prevent the spread of communism. At the same time an ABC News poll showed that 56 percent of people believed that Nicaragua was a threat to American security. So if you follow a line of reasoning, which pollsters don't, you might think that since people supported both a containment of communism and felt that Nicaragua was a threat to U.S. security, they would support Contra aid. In fact, nearly every poll I saw showed public disapproval of assistance to the Contras.<sup>43</sup>

Representative Edwards also pointed to polls showing that between five and ten percent of respondents believed that the United States was supporting the Sandinistas, 25-30 percent believed the United States was funding the resistance, and the rest did not know. Those statistics show a confused or misinformed public. This helps to show why Countdown '87 had success in their 1987-1988 campaign in overcoming this common failing of lobbyists. Because so many of the NGOs worked to educate their members, they were able to convince their representatives that they understood the issue thoroughly. This brought more credibility to the anti-Contra aid poll numbers in those key swing districts.

Many representatives felt that, even if public opinion went against them, they would still have the trust, and therefore the votes of the people of the district. Some representatives compared this to the prevailing notion that Congress should support the president in matters of foreign policy even if they disagreed. Representatives were told by

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Sobel, ed, *Public Opinion and Contra Aid*, 245.

many of their constituents that while they personally opposed Contra aid they trusted their representative's judgment.<sup>44</sup> The task for Countdown and the NGOs therefore was much more complicated than simply proving to representatives that the polls were against them. The opponents had to convince the swing voters that public opinion was lopsided against them, educated, and capable of being mobilized. Ike Skelton (D-MO-4) is a good example of how strategic protestors needed to act. During the 1986 Contra debate he faced protestors but he was convinced that they were from outside his district and therefore could safely ignore them. The fact that they were outside his district also tended to rally his district around him and he later recalled that as a result of the protests, "at least for a moment, the Contras picked up a bit of popularity." However, Skelton noted that not all members of Congress had the same degree of freedom on the Contra aid issue that his constituents gave him.<sup>45</sup> Representative Mickey Edwards (R-OK) also discussed how important the type of pressure was for encouraging members of Congress to vote a certain way. He believed that the public was largely uninformed on the issue except for a limited number of activists on both sides. Only in the case where these local grassroots organizations were able to focus pressure in a way that showed that it was coming from inside the district, and did not feature merely the "usual suspects,"<sup>46</sup> were the efforts

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<sup>44</sup> Sobel, *Public Opinion and Contra Aid*, 243. Representative Ike Skelton of Missouri's 4<sup>th</sup> District was a Democrat who supported Contra aid.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with William Schneider quoted in its entirety in Richard Sobel, ed., *Public Opinion and Contra Aid*, 244.

<sup>46</sup> "The usual suspects are a direct Quote from Representative Edwards. Later in the interview he admitted that spontaneous looking opinion from their constituents tended to grab their attention. He said, "...people bringing it up on their own volition at town meetings without being prompted to express an opinion, and had not been the people who

successful. Edwards noted that some of his colleagues, specifically John Miller (D-WA) and Olympia Snowe (R-ME), had enough opposition in their district to keep them from voting with President Reagan as often as they wanted. These facts were known by Countdown '87, and the NGOs that it directed, in the 1987-1988 campaign. They deliberately targeted members of Congress who were in districts that opposed further aid to the Contras, and made sure that the people who contacted members of Congress were not only in their district, but knew them already. They also recruited people who neither wrote letters to the editor nor protested regularly.

Representative Bill Richardson (D-NM) also believed that political pressure was a factor in how he voted. He noted that his town meetings were attended by organized activists who let their voice be heard on the Contra issue. However, because he was from a safe democratic district, it affected him on the primary level rather than the general election. Richardson believed that his vote for humanitarian aid to the Contras hurt him among his core liberal constituency and was a bigger issue for them than environmental issues, homelessness, or other social program issues that were being debated in Congress at the time. He admitted that that one vote with Reagan for Contra aid cost him politically, saying, "I don't know if I am a martyr, but I was thirty-one times against the president, and once for him; and most people, including my constituents, remember me for the one time that I was for him. It took me a couple of years from my liberal constituents to recover from that vote." Richardson also pointed out that most of the

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were identifiable as activists who moved from one liberal position to another, but something that would seem more clearly to just arising out of public concern, I think we would have responded." Quoted in Sobel, *Public Opinion and Contra Aid*, 256.

media attention about the situation in Nicaragua was limited to the beltway press.<sup>47</sup> One of the strengths of Countdown and what made it different from the previous campaigns was its ability to make it an effective local extension of a national issue. The representatives therefore had both local and national pressure put to bear on them during the debate. The grassroots pressure was informed, motivated, and strategic which meant that they could not be ignored.

Immediately after the vote, *Racine Labor* tried to come to grips with why Contra aid had been defeated. Part of their curiosity had to do with their witnessing locally of one of the more dramatic swings of the campaign. Representative Les Aspin (D-WI), normally a solid pro-Contra voter, pleased his labor and progressive constituents by voting against Contra aid on 3 February. *Racine Labor* tracked the switch back to October when a group of 61 top labor leaders in Aspin's district wrote him an open letter which asked him to vote against the Contras. The open letter asserted that the Contras were a force created by the Reagan administration for the purpose of restoring a pro-corporate, right-wing government in Nicaragua. The labor leaders believed this policy was part of the Reagan administration's overall effort to make Central America and Mexico more hospitable to United States corporations. The labor leaders also thought supporting the Contras was a bad use of money, considering how badly investment was needed in their district. Beyond labor concerns the letter also stated that they believed further Contra aid would upset the peace process initiated by Arias. When *Racine Labor* interviewed Mike Webster, president of Communication Workers of America Local

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<sup>47</sup> Sobel, *Public Opinion and Contra Aid*, 249, 254.

4611, he told them that he thought a key factor was the pressure coordinated by the Wisconsin Action Coalition (WAC). WAC was the local NGO that was coordinating Countdown's efforts in the district. Webster pointed to the series of public events and a cable TV advertisement campaign that asked citizens to urge Aspin to vote against Contra aid. WAC Co-Chairman Ron Thomas was proud of their effort and believed the advertisements brought their lobbying to a new level. Webster also noted that WAC had brought a new level of organizing to the process, he told *Racine Labor*, "I have to attribute a lot to Wisconsin Action. Before, labor and religious groups have been doing things (to influence Aspin) but WAC drew us all together. I think we impacted him." Webster did not believe the fight to end aid to the Contras was over but was encouraged by the results.<sup>48</sup>

There is more to the story, however. What *Racine Labor* did not report was the fact that Aspin had called the local Countdown '87 organizer early on to announce that local pressure would have no effect on his pro-Contra aid stance. However, he found himself late in the campaign at a meeting organized by Countdown '87 and attended by some of his most influential supporters announcing that he would be opposing further aid. Further evidence of Countdown '87's direct influence in the process was the announcement of a press conference by WAC to thank Representative Aspin for his vote against Contra aid – which was the final step listed in the Countdown field manual.<sup>49</sup> At

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<sup>48</sup> "Defeat of Contra Aid Plan Hailed by Labor, WAC Here," *Racine Labor*, 5 February 1988.

<sup>49</sup> Field Operations, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66/Countdown 87.

least in the case of Aspin the field manual was followed closely and it produced dramatic results.

Another example of this effective grassroots pressure was the case of Freshman Republican Amo Houghton. Houghton voted against Contra aid on 3 February in the face of significant pressure by President Reagan telling the press that, “it (the vote for Contra aid) just didn’t feel right.” This quote, while stopping short of giving the credit to Countdown and the influence wielded by local NGOs, makes more sense if one considers that these groups provided him information showing that the administration’s proposed “Humanitarian Aid” was virtually everything short of actual weapons. Houghton also wrote a telling letter to Countdown ‘87 after the vote and noted that Countdown 87’s campaign was very effective in his district. Even those who voted for the Reagan administration’s request conceded that Countdown 87’s campaign was effective. Both Steve Gunderson of Minnesota and Fred Grandy of Iowa admitted that they were knowingly voting against the wishes of their district.<sup>50</sup>

**Key Swing Votes on Contra Aid (House) Targeted By Countdown ‘87**

Member	District	Vote on Contra aid
Aspin	(D, WI-1)	No
Bilbray	(D, NV-1)	No
Carper	(D, DE a/1)	No
English	(D, OK-6)	Yes
Frenzel	(R, MN-3)	Yes
Goodling	(R, PA-19)	Yes
Gradison	(R, OH-2)	Yes
Grandy	(R, IA-6)	Yes
Gunderson	(R, WI-3)	Yes
Henry	(R, MI-5)	No
Houghton	(R, NY-34)	No

<sup>50</sup> Field Operations, Bonior Papers, Wayne State University, Box 66/Countdown 87.

Jenkins	(D, GA-9)	Yes
McGrath	(R, NY-5)	Yes
Miller	(R, WA-1)	Yes
Patterson	(D, SC-4)	Yes
Pickett	(D, VA-2)	Yes
Pursell	(R, MI-2)	Yes
Regula	(R, OH-1)	Yes
Saiki	(R, HI-1)	Yes
Slattery	(D, KS-2)	No
Smith	(R, OR-2)	Yes
Snowe	(R, ME-2)	Yes
Watkins	(D, OK-3)	Yes

Clearly not everyone targeted by Countdown voted against Contra aid. However they were able to convince enough Representatives to vote against President Reagan's proposal, which was the goal of the campaign.

## CHAPTER 11

### APPLAUDING THE VICTORS AND ASSIGNING BLAME

As the myriad of observers of the Contra aid debate predicted, the 3 February vote did not end the discussion, nor did it end the proposals. Immediately following the vote, Representative Bob Dornan (R-CA) stood up to address the House concerning his belief that “liberty in our hemisphere has been temporarily murdered by a close vote in the House this evening.”<sup>1</sup> His concern, laid out in his long rambling speech, was that the Sandinistas and the Soviet Union would ultimately triumph over Reagan. Dornan described the close vote that was helped by 12 Republicans who voted against their president. He listed 5 of these by name, Boehlert of New York,. Amo Houghton of New York, Claudine Scheider of Rhode Island,. Thomas Tauke of Iowa, and Paul Henry of Michigan. Dornan proposed that all of these were in safe districts and would not face political retribution if they switched their votes. An astute student of recent history, Dornan also thought it likely that Ortega would violate the peace process and force 9 of the 12 defecting Republicans to restore funding to the Contras.

The speech proposed that the Ortegas were city boys, frauds, and extortionists. Dornan, striving to be balanced, next spoke about the Contra’s shortcomings, then took a shot at the NGOs that had clearly influenced the debate:

It sickens me that some of the Contras we are supporting in their fight revert to the brutality that Somoza engendered. That creates human rights violations. Many of them have been court-martialed, some of them have been executed in the field, and, yes, some of them are not serving their sentences. I have griped about that.

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<sup>1</sup> Dornan, as this quote illustrates, was an arch-conservative known for his hyperbole.

But all the people down there that are worthy of the word "truth" tell me that the violations on the Sandinista side are 10 to 1. But we would not get that out of some of the befuddled bishops, networking nuns, and trendy ministers and vicars, to quote Henry Hyde on this House floor. And that is exactly what they are, trendy.<sup>2</sup>

Later in the speech Dornan noted one of the NGOs, Witness for Peace, had cycled through Nicaragua and “fallen in love with the Communist regime.” In a clear attempt to discredit a source that his opponents saw as credible, he described them as naïve dupes. As one considers the role that NGOs played in shaping the debate regarding Contra funding, one cannot help but notice that they were both credited by their allies and blamed by their opponents.<sup>3</sup>

The immediate result of the vote was that the CIA had to stop shipment of arms to the Contras on 29 February. Another result of the defeat was the loss of any “expedited procedures” for congressional action on any later request. Reagan could still ask for additional aid, but would have to go through normal channels and wait through routine delays. While the stinging defeat settled in, *Congressional Quarterly* (CQ) assessed some factors instrumental in the defeat. CQ noted that Speaker Wright’s decision to offer a Democratic alternative helped 15 moderate Democrats feel better about voting for the bill. CQ also noted that several swing voters voted against Reagan’s proposal for fear of having to vote again soon for Contra aid. The explanation was that they were tired of the intense lobbying and political pressure and hoped for an easier time during an election

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<sup>2</sup> *Congressional Record*, 100<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., Vol. 134, H226.

<sup>3</sup> *Congressional Record*, 100<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., Vol. 134, H574. As 1988 rolled along they continued to pop up in debates and remarks made on the floor of Congress. For example, Mrs. Vucanovich of Nevada was commenting on the Sandinistas human rights record and took time to say that the Witness for Peace volunteers were dupes.

year. At the end of the article *CQ* also noted that reports of vote-trading abounded. Naming names, *CQ* reported that Representative Roy Dyson (D-MD), a traditional Contra backer, tried to use his vote to save a naval facility back home. The Reagan administration refused and Dyson voted “no.”<sup>4</sup>

Hoping that the Democrats would fail to come up with a coherent strategy and thus return to the 3 February plan, the Reagan administration declined to be part of the Democratic alternative proposal. However, learning their lesson from the Iran-Contra scandal, the Reagan administration issued a memo saying,

No Administration official should provide assistance or encouragement of any kind of private individuals or third parties raising funds on the freedom fighters behalf. Any such aid, no matter how well intentioned, would be misunderstood, misinterpreted, and therefore, counterproductive.

Contra leaders said they would raise money from private officials until Congress resumes funding. *CQ* noted that one of the first donations was \$500 from the Senate Majority Leader, and presidential candidate, Robert Dole (R-KS).<sup>5</sup>

There would be no resuming military aid, however. House Democrats brought a Contra aid alternative before the House on March 3 which contained more than \$30 million in nonlethal aid. The bill was eventually defeated by an odd mix of liberal and conservative Representatives. All but five Republicans voted against the bill in hopes of securing a better package for the Contras. They were joined by fifteen liberal democrats

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<sup>4</sup>“Contra-Aid Denial Shifts Burden to Democrats,” *Congressional Quarterly*, Vol 46, 6 February 1988, p235-238.

<sup>5</sup> “Democrats to offer ‘Humanitarian’ Assistance: Reagan, GOP Remain Aloof from New Contra-Aid Plan,” *Congressional Quarterly*, 13 February 1988, p 292.

who voted against their leadership as a protest against any sort of Contra aid.<sup>6</sup> It seemed to the Contras that they had been deserted by Republicans who would rather let the Contras fade away than vote with the Democrats on a compromise bill. The Contras, significantly weakened, felt deflated and alone as they retreated toward Honduras. On March 16 the Sandinistas invaded Honduras to capture the Contras' arms stockpiles. Honduras, caught in the middle and facing a no-win situation, reluctantly asked the United States for help. The Reagan administration answered by ordering the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne to Honduras as a strong sign of support for their reluctant ally. The Sandinistas, fearful of an all out United States intervention, halted the offensive and retreated back into Nicaragua. Once the United Nations confirmed that the Sandinistas had entered Honduras the mood in Congress warmed toward additional Contra aid and was only cooled off by a series of parliamentary maneuvers. The episode, which could have easily been the final scene for the Contras, actually worked in their advantage. The surprising ability of the Contras to survive a major Sandinista assault, the quick response of the Reagan administration, and the loud threats by members of Congress to renew Contra aid significantly improved the Contras leverage at the negotiating table.<sup>7</sup> The resulting Sepoa agreement<sup>8</sup> arranged a formal truce between the two sides. The Sandinistas granted the Contras political recognition, unrestricted freedom of expression, the gradual release of political prisoners, and the freedom to keep their weapons until the peace process was

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<sup>6</sup> Arnson, *Crossroads*, 224.

<sup>7</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 587-594.

<sup>8</sup> Sepoa, a village on the Costa Rican border, was the site of the March 1988 talks between the Contras and Sandinistas.

complete. The Contras agreed to recognize Sandinista rule, recognize the legitimacy of President Daniel Ortega, and to refuse any military aid from anyone and only receive humanitarian aid from “neutral organizations.” President Arias of Costa Rica was involved in the negotiations and encouraged both sides to reach an agreement.<sup>9</sup> Surprised and delighted by the trend towards peace, Congress passed a bill providing humanitarian support through a neutral agency supported by both the Contras and the Sandinistas. Ironically, the bill that passed easily in both houses made the situation more difficult. The Sandinistas objected to the bill, and hoped that if they could delay the delivery of U.S. aid to the Contras, they would force the Contras to make additional concessions. The Contras, encouraged by the new support in Congress, decided to dig in and make additional demands.<sup>10</sup> The two sides gradually began violating the spirit, if not outright the terms of Sapoa. The simmering conflict between the two sides kept tension high, but with good reason the Sandinistas believed that they could outlast the Contras.

The evolving political situation in the United States gave considerable comfort to the Sandinistas as the year progressed. Neither Democrats nor Republicans wanted much to do with the Contras. While the democratic ticket was split between Michael Dukakis who opposed any Contra aid, and Lloyd Bentsen who supported it, the Sandinistas took comfort in Dukakis’ stated position on aid and the fact that he seemed likely to win the election. Republican nominee Vice President George H.W. Bush gave the Contras little reason to hope. Following the advice of his campaign manager, Bush ignored the topic,

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Kinzer, “Sandinista-Contra Cease-Fire Opens Way to a Durable Peace, Rival Nicaraguan Factors Say,” *New York Times*, 25 March 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 595-596.

knowing that there was no public support for further aid.<sup>11</sup> The Sandinistas decided to wait and see whom the United States would elect, maintaining the cease-fire with the Contras. While disappointed with the Republican victory, they were more dismayed with Nicaragua's failing economy. By February of 1989, exhausted and facing a ruined economy, they agreed to hold elections in February of 1990 in exchange for the disbanding of the Contras. They thought if they could get rid of the Contras, they might be able to secure foreign investment again and somehow pull out of the economic freefall. This move was popular with the international community but eventually led to their own demise.

The Bush administration, using the opportunities that the Sandinistas gave them, worked to support the opposition in Nicaragua. Secretary of State James Baker and Speaker Wright, both anxious to avoid a contentious debate on the subject, agreed to support the Contras with humanitarian aid until after the scheduled election in Nicaragua. From late spring 1989 the opposition began to form a surprising amount of unity and by August it agreed to support Violeta Chamorro, owner of *La Prensa* and widow of the martyred Pedro Joaquin Chamorro.<sup>12</sup> Unexpectedly Violeta Chamorro defeated the Sandinistas in February 1990 elections and took power in April of 1990. An editorial in the *New York Times* following the vote in Nicaragua summarized the end of an era,

In a statement that struck just the right note, President Bush not only congratulated Mrs. Chamorro but graciously commended Mr. Ortega for his fairness. "Given a clear mandate for peace and democracy," he added, "there is no reason at all for further military activity from any quarter."

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<sup>11</sup> Arnson, *Crossroads*, 225.

<sup>12</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 657-658.

Mrs. Chamorro's convincing victory is another boon for Mr. Bush in a time of startling democratic surprises. It follows the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, deepens the isolation of Fidel Castro in Cuba and diminishes the threat from a Marxist insurgency in El Salvador. And it enables the Administration to claim victory for its Nicaragua policy while ending a decade of divisive, and obsessive, aid for Contra rebels.<sup>13</sup>

The end of the Contra-aid era was brought about by exhaustion of all parties involved. Even throughout the contentious summer of 1988 as the Sandinistas launched offensives and violated terms of previous agreements, Congress resisted calls for additional military aid. The long struggle had simply worn them out, and they seemed reluctant to provoke the grassroots activists who had displayed their resolve during the winter of 1987-1988. President Bush saw what the ideological battle did to the Reagan administration and worked to avoid a similar confrontation with Congress and the general public so well mobilized by Countdown and its NGO allies.

The NGOs were also exhausted and gradually dissolved. Sociologist Christian Smith<sup>14</sup> asked activists in the early 1990s what happened to the Central America movement. The responses were instructive:

*Political activism is really difficult to sustain year after year. We really put ourselves into it, but at the end, people got tired.*

Pledge of Resistance organizer Anne Shumway (1990)

*Many political factors caused the movement's decline, and the fact is, many activists just became very tired.*

Phyllis Talor (1990)

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<sup>13</sup> "The Morning After," 27 February 1990.

<sup>14</sup> *Resisting Reagan*, 348.

*Eventually I just left Witness for Peace, which was really the right thing for me to do. So many problems had developed and I was just sick of dealing with them. I mean, I had worked for non-profit organizations most of my adult life and, quite frankly, I was just pretty tired of it all.*

Bob Van Denend (1992)<sup>15</sup>

*I was getting so burned out trying to deal with all of the responsibilities and problems, I had to take a three-month sabbatical during the summer of 1988 just to keep sane. And when I returned, there were a whole new set of problems to deal with. So, I fulfilled my obligations, then backed out of my prominent position pretty much for good.*

Betsy Crites, Witness for Peace Organizer (1992)

President Bush's nearly invisible, pragmatic policy also finalized the movement's demise. Because Bush's course of action was relatively free from controversy, it took attention away from the movement and took away the volunteers' motivation to be involved. From the volunteer's perspective the race was over and it was time to return to a normal life. From the beginning the movement was largely based on resisting an aggressive United States foreign policy in Central America. When Reagan left office, Bush was content to let the issue deflate by being noticeably less aggressive.<sup>16</sup>

Smith proposed the following, "Social movements..live and die by fluctuations in three critical factors: the structure of political opportunities they face, which is primary, the organizational capacity they possess, and the intensity of insurgent consciousness they enjoy." Reagan's concentration on Central America gave it incredible visibility and numerous political opportunities. When military funding was eliminated they won, but

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 361.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 355-356.

lost a reason to exist. When Reagan left office and was replaced by a much more pragmatic George Bush, they essentially won – as in their success made Bush want to avoid the issue entirely, but they lost a reason to exist. One can only keep up intensity for so long. It simply appears that those passionate about Central America believed that the problem was solved and moved on to other issues or back to their regular lives.<sup>17</sup>

Longevity of a coherent movement was not the point, however. The NGOs who existed to fight against Contra aid faded away, but the NGOs who had others reasons to exist simply transferred their energy and personnel to other issues. The coalition that came together to form Countdown '87 were successful in part because it was not a group of professional activists or partisans. Instead of a group of usual suspects Countdown '87 was made up of ordinary citizens that found out that they could do something extraordinary if they acted in a strategic way.

In April 1985 the Reagan administration asked for \$14 million in nonmilitary Contra aid. The House of Representatives rejected the request by a vote of 215 to 213. CIA director William Casey in shock credited NGOs, “If Tip O’Neill didn’t have Maryknoll nuns who wrote letters, we would have a contra program.”<sup>18</sup> When the Reagan administration worked to discredit, harass, and discredit peace activists throughout the 80s, they showed again how powerful they believed the movement of NGOs to be.<sup>19</sup> Finally when the leaders of the anti-Contra aid thanked Countdown '87 for its valuable support and the Contra aid backers blamed “duped” NGOs for the defeat of Contra

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<sup>17</sup> *Resisting Reagan*, 348.

<sup>18</sup> Woodward, *Veil*, 402.

<sup>19</sup> *Resisting Reagan*, 318.

funding in February 1988, both sides acknowledged the powerful role that they played in making U.S. foreign policy. The fact that the movement dissolved after Reagan left office in no way diminishes its historical significance.

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## APPENDIX A

Congressional Record -- House

Wednesday, February 3, 1988

100th Cong. 2nd Sess.

134 Cong Rec H 90

**REFERENCE:** Vol. 134 No. 7

**TITLE:** APPROVING THE PRESIDENT'S REQUEST FOR CONTRA AID

(10 hours of debate on the president's request followed)

The text of House Joint Resolution 444 is as follows:

H.J. RES. 444

RESOLVED BY THE SENATE AND HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA IN CONGRESS ASSEMBLED, That the Congress hereby approves the additional authority and assistance for the Nicaraguan democratic resistance that the President requested pursuant to H.J. Res. 395 of the One Hundredth Congress, the Act making continuing appropriations for fiscal year 1988.

The CHAIRMAN. Pursuant to section 111(k)(3) of Public Law 100-202, no amendments are in order; and pursuant to section 111(k)(4) of said law, the Committee does now rise.

Accordingly the Committee rose; and the Speaker having resumed the Chair, Mr. Kildee, Chairman of the Committee on the Whole House on the State of the Union, reported that that Committee, having had under consideration the joint resolution (H.J. Res. 444) relating to Central America pursuant to House Joint Resolution 395 of the 100th Congress, pursuant to section 111(k)(4) of Public Law 100-202, he reported the bill back to the House.

The SPEAKER. Pursuant to section 111(k)(4) Public Law 100-202, the previous question is ordered.

The question is on the passage of the joint resolution.

The question was taken; and the Speaker announced that the noes appeared to have it.

RECORDED VOTE

Mr. EDWARDS of Oklahoma. Mr. Speaker, I demand a recorded vote.

A recorded vote was ordered.

The vote was taken by electronic device, and there were -- ayes 211, noes 219, not voting 3, as follows:

(See Roll No. 7 in the ROLL segment.)

So the joint resolution was not passed.