

# THE OTHER EIGHTIES

A SECRET HISTORY OF AMERICA  
IN THE AGE OF REAGAN

BRADFORD MARTIN



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**A Secret History of America  
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**For Jackson, Hazel, Harry, and Charlie**

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# CONTENTS

Title Page  
Dedication

- 1. Calling to Halt: The Nuclear Freeze Campaign**
  - 2. The Central America Solidarity Movement: Opposing Secret Wars in the Backyard**
  - 3. “Unsightly Huts”: Shanties and the Divestment Movement**
  - 4. Popular Culture and the Culture Wars**
  - 5. Noise from Underground: Post-Punk Music, Culture, and Politics**
  - 6. Fighting the Power: The Response of African American Politics and Culture**
  - 7. Fighting the Backlash: The Many Paths of Feminism**
  - 8. The Shock Troops of Direct Action: ACT UP Confronts the AIDS Crisis**
- Epilogue: The Other Eighties in the Age of Obama**

*Notes*

*Acknowledgments*

*Index*

*Preface*

Also by Bradford Martin

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# CALLING TO HALT

## The Nuclear Freeze Campaign

On June 12, 1982, children and octogenarians were on the march. So were World War II veterans and Tibetans for World Peace. Coretta Scott King and the Bread and Puppet Theater. College students and trade unionists. Movie stars and rock stars. Quakers and Roman Catholic bishops. International pilgrims hailing from such far corners of the globe as Japan, Europe, the Soviet Union, Zambia, and Bangladesh. The total tallied somewhere around three-quarters of a million souls, all making the trek from the United Nations to the Great Lawn of New York City's Central Park, where the march concluded with a rally for nuclear disarmament. The gathering marked a high point of popular support for the disarmament movement, the largest protest rally in United States history to date. Contemporary observers repeatedly noted its diversity. Phrases like "kaleidoscope of humanity," "rainbow spectrum," and "largest, most diverse gathering for a single cause" redounded through media accounts of the event.<sup>1</sup> Within that diversity, discernible patterns appeared. The usual suspects on the political left were well represented. Established peace and disarmament groups, from Mobilization for Survival to the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), organized the event to coincide with the United Nations second special session on disarmament. Peace-oriented religious groups, including the American Friends Service Committee, Pax Christi USA, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, loomed prominently among the sponsors. Professional organizations from Physicians for Social Responsibility, to the Union of Concerned Scientists, to the National Lawyers Guild all lent support. Jackson Browne, James Taylor, Bruce Springsteen, Joan Baez, and Linda Ronstadt, musicians with long track records of support for peace and antinuclear causes, all performed.

But though the usual suspects organized the rally, its vast, broad-based assemblage made the Central Park gathering different. The Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, as the center organization's official title ran, struck upon a simple and galvanizing idea—for the United States and the Soviet Union to enter a mutual and verifiable freeze on the testing, production, and deployment of all nuclear weapons—and through widespread grassroots activity delivered that message to mainstream America. The campaign drew from all socioeconomic groups in almost every geographic region—and even garnered support from Republicans.

The campaign rode this wave of enthusiasm through the 1982 midterm elections, which saw a number of freeze resolutions around the country succeed in state referenda. After that, the movement declined, failing to translate popular momentum into concrete policy measures and faltering badly with the advent of President Reagan's Star Wars plan and his 1984 reelection.<sup>2</sup> But along the way, the movement wielded more influence than popular accounts suggest, reshaping the foreign policy landscape in which the Reagan administration operated. The saber-rattling Cold Warrior rhetoric of Reagan during his candidacy and the early part of his first administration asked the American public

to envision fighting and winning a nuclear war and to commit the necessary resources to building nuclear arsenals to achieve superiority over the Soviets. The freeze campaign pressured the administration to tone down its foreign policy ambitions and encouraged a move toward arms reduction negotiations. It eroded the authority of the high priesthood of defense intellectuals, a group that developed a self-reinforcing idea that nuclear weapons policy ought to remain the exclusive domain of expert insiders who had mastered the highly technical intricacies of ICBMs and MX and Pershing II missiles. It reenergized public discussion about national security by making it more accessible. Most Americans, whether or not they agreed with the idea, could wrap their minds around the concept of stopping the creation of more nuclear weapons as a logical first step to eliminating them altogether. Finally, the movement succeeded in orienting many Americans toward a more internationalist and global peace perspective and away from fixation on the bipolar superpower conflict by exploring common ground between the interests of American citizens and those of people around the world.

The freeze movement combined veteran activist leadership at the national level with a tremendous vitality at the grass roots. From the local pressure of Vermont town meetings passing resolutions to the populist statement of half a million Californians signing a petition, the campaign empowered ordinary people to challenge the national security establishment. It fostered greater awareness of Americans' interconnectedness with European "neighbors" threatened by the specter of nuclear war and it represented genuine ferment at the grass roots that surfaced at the level of national politics. Despite the simplicity of its appeal, it failed to achieve its targeted results of stopping nuclear weapons testing, production, and deployment. Though it mobilized new activists by the thousands, its lack of a militant wing, capable of direct action when necessary, encouraged co-optation and discouraged more substantive concessions from national leaders. Priding itself on being a more reasonable, tempered kind of movement that eschewed the excesses of 1960s activism, the freeze movement reflected the resurgence of a consensus-oriented, anti-dissent mood that pervaded the dominant culture of the 1980s. This attitude set limits on the movement's potency. But against the backdrop of the early Reagan administration's militant tone and actions, freeze supporters elevated public awareness of peace and disarmament issues, reshaped the dialogue about nuclear weapons, and forced national policymakers to adopt a subtler, less frontal approach to waging the Cold War.

## **Calling to Halt: Randall Forsberg and the Idea of the Freeze**

Though mass movements frequently downplay the importance of individual leaders, Randall Forsberg was the freeze's most identifiable figure. Forsberg's arms control career took her from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), to a political science doctorate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to founding the Institute for Defense and Disarmament Studies in 1980. Her experience at SIPRI, an institution dedicated to independent analysis of U.S.-Soviet rivalry, loomed large. There, originally working as a typist, Forsberg discovered that superpower talks over a 1963 test ban treaty had broken down over U.S. insistence on seven inspections a year, while the Russians held the line at three. The experience made her wonder, "Why not compromise on five?"<sup>3</sup> This evenhanded commonsense approach to the Cold War pervaded Forsberg's intellectual outlook and shaped the freeze's bilateral approach. It also guided her willingness to confront the arms control establishment's insular technocracy.

Forsberg crafted the freeze's seminal statement, "A Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race," t

penetrate the nuclear elite's intimidating culture of expertise. The 1980 document built on the work of groups such as Mobilization for Survival, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which had also called for a moratorium on constructing and deploying nuclear weapons. In 1979 the AFSC sponsored a delegation to the Soviet Union, which included Forsberg, to explore the feasibility of this plan. Upon her return, Forsberg revised the freeze idea to maximize its potential to attract support from mainstream America. She conceived of the proposed freeze as a manageable first small step toward further, more comprehensive disarmament initiatives—one that could unify diverse groups of activists and citizens on the way to something much bigger that would ultimately produce a more peaceful world.

Yet against the backdrop of the arms race, a total freeze was no mere baby step. Halting the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons would mean that neither the United States nor the Soviets could add to their stockpiles or improve nuclear technologies to newly lethal levels. Seductively simple, Forsberg's plan transcended previous arms control proposals by promising first to stop the arms race in its tracks, then to pursue further reductions.<sup>4</sup> Proponents of a mutual and verifiable freeze cleverly provided an accessible goal that a broad cross section of the American public could rally behind.

Moreover, the clear language of "Call to Halt" gave activists the confidence to enter the national policymaking debate on nuclear weapons. Contending that "the horror of a nuclear holocaust is universally acknowledged," the freeze proposal cast the issue as simple common sense. It claimed that the two superpowers possessed upward of fifty thousand nuclear weapons, a stockpile that could wipe out "all cities in the northern hemisphere" in half an hour. With these facts simply stated, "Call to Halt" underscored the excessive nature of plans for the United States and the U.S.S.R. to build twenty thousand more nuclear warheads, along with new missiles and aircraft. Echoing Albert Einstein's maxim about the impossibility of simultaneously preparing for and preventing war, the freeze proposal claimed that burgeoning weapons programs would "pull the nuclear tripwire tighter, creating "hairtrigger readiness for a massive nuclear exchange." Rejecting the logic of deterrence that underpinned three decades of arms race escalation, the freeze idea posited that more nuclear weapons made the world more dangerous rather than safer. "Call to Halt" also invoked the mammoth fiscal savings a freeze would entail, sketching out numerous domestic spending alternatives and a range of attendant social and economic benefits. Finally, the proposal pointed to further steps toward a lasting peace that could be addressed after achieving a U.S.-Soviet freeze, including extending the freeze to other nations and reducing existing nuclear arsenals.

An inspiring document with populist appeal, "Call to Halt" was quickly endorsed by a laundry list of prominent activists, intellectuals, and leaders, including the former undersecretary of state George Ball, the most prominent of President Lyndon Johnson's advisers to oppose escalation in Vietnam; the former secretary of defense Clark Clifford; the former CIA director William Colby; the former ambassador to the Soviet Union Averell Harriman; and the U.S. Cold War policy architect George Kennan. Scientific community supporters included the two-time Nobel laureate Linus Pauling, the former MIT president Jerome Wiesner, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* editor Bernard Feld, Jon Salk, and the *Cosmos* host Carl Sagan. With these and other illustrious names behind it, the movement swiftly gained legitimacy.<sup>5</sup>

But just as the freeze movement gained popular support, it was forced to grapple with an event that posed a grave threat to its goals: the election of Ronald Reagan. The complex public sentiment that could simultaneously produce a potent statement against nuclear weapons and install a hard-line Cold Warrior in the highest office reflected a transitional moment in national politics. American

wrestled in a psychic tug-of-war between fear of nuclear annihilation and desire for renewed military might. One *New York Times*/CBS poll showed 72 percent support for a freeze but hastened to point out that the numbers roughly flipped if such a moratorium froze a Soviet weapons advantage in place.<sup>6</sup>

Sensing this ambivalence, peace activists recognized the need to develop a systematic approach to organizing, educating, and wielding political influence, and in March 1981 they convened in Washington, D.C., to formulate the game plan. Though excitement pervaded the conference, a set of conflicts emerged among the attendees. Some activists viewed the nuclear freeze as an end in itself, an important and legitimate arms control goal worth striving for; others, including Forsberg, saw it as a discrete, winnable battle that could open up the policymaking terrain for confronting broader issues of militarism. Further, they contended that such a freeze might ultimately transform international relations, especially U.S.-Soviet animosity and suspicion. The competing goals and visions for the freeze raised complex questions for movement strategy as well. If freeze activists wished to use the proposal to confront the arms race and militarism more broadly, this suggested a more militant approach that could educate about the connections, for instance, between the bipolar weapons race and Cold War interventionism in the Third World. On the other hand, if the vision of the freeze as its own prize prevailed, this suggested avoiding larger, more ideologically charged issues, since these risked alienating mainstream supporters who bristled at leftist critiques of militarism that flowed from the ranks of the more radical peace activists.

Ultimately, the conference committed to a tight focus on the main issue and a strategy that emphasized slow, steady education and building grassroots support. Restricting the agenda was a conscious choice, contrary to the wishes of supporters who also wanted a movement that indicted Cold War militarism generally. Though most organizers agreed that the freeze was a legitimate goal, it also represented a lowest common denominator strategy. Steering clear of controversy enough to attract support from mainstream Americans with no previous activist experience, it was “small enough to be achievable, and large enough to be inspiring.” The residue of distaste for the excesses of 1960s-era radical protest, increasingly excoriated and discredited by 1980s media and intelligentsia, hung heavily over the conference. Accordingly, the conference’s resolution—a four-phase strategy of demonstrating the concept’s potential, building public support, leveraging policymakers and provoking national debate, and making the freeze a national policy objective—sought to maximize mainstream participation at the grass roots. Freeze organizers wanted to avoid creating a movement where veteran radical peace activists played the central role. As Forsberg remarked, she wanted the movement “very middle class.”<sup>7</sup> As it turned out, this strategy succeeded, for better and for worse.

## Grass Roots

Independently of Forsberg’s efforts, Massachusetts peace activists led by Randy Kehler of the Traprock Peace Center had been collecting signatures at supermarkets and shopping centers for a statewide ballot measure calling on the president to propose a bilateral nuclear weapons moratorium. In November 1980, after a summer and fall educational campaign about the arms race and its social and economic impact that included house meetings, study groups, film showings, and school presentations, voters in three western Massachusetts state senatorial districts endorsed the freeze measure by a 3:2 ratio. Kehler, later the freeze campaign’s national coordinator, touted its potential. “The nuclear race transcends party division and conservative-liberal divisions, and this proves that the American public is indeed ready to see the nuclear arms race ended.” Kehler waxed enthusiastic about



the possibilities for broad-based support and predicted that the Massachusetts victory would catalyze similar campaigns elsewhere. This proved prophetic when, in March 1981, sixteen towns neighboring Vermont and New Hampshire passed freeze measures, calling on their state congressional delegations to sponsor a resolution in Congress. The scenes of these victories, in time-honored New England town meetings, were not completely without controversy. Traditionally held on the second Tuesday of March, these meetings embodied American democratic traditions at their best, but nevertheless the freeze issue inspired debate about whether the forum was appropriate. Echoing the view that matters of national security and nuclear weapons policy ought to be the exclusive terrain of expert federal policymakers, one opponent cried, "There's no place in town meeting for politics!" Of course, what this New Hampshireite meant was that nuclear policy—as part of national politics, and a highly technical area within national politics at that—did not appropriately deserve consideration alongside other town affairs he regarded as more direct and legitimate.<sup>8</sup> Yet the majority of voters in these sixteen Yankee towns staked their claim that ordinary citizens merited a role in a national discussion of how to avoid nuclear peril. The wide margin of these victories suggests the issue's immediacy at the dawn of the Reagan presidency.

On the other coast, the Massachusetts news energized the Southern Californian Nick Seidita, who remembered, "I jumped from my chair exclaiming to myself, 'If they could put the Freeze on the ballot in Massachusetts, we can put it on the ballot in California.'" Along with his wife, Jo, a veteran of the antiwar Democratic candidate Eugene McCarthy's 1968 campaign, Seidita engineered California Proposition 12, jump-starting the freeze movement on the West Coast. The Seiditas also initially encountered skepticism about whether a state referendum was an appropriate forum for a measure aimed to halt the arms race that was the centerpiece of national Cold War strategy. Told that California law would not permit a national policy issue on the state ballot, the Seiditas got some help from a lawyer friend and tweaked the future Proposition 12 to require the governor to write to the president to notify him that a majority of the state's electorate voted for a nuclear freeze.<sup>9</sup>

The California freeze campaign spawned feverish political organizing and educational efforts in the quest to secure the more than three hundred thousand signatures necessary to get the initiative on the ballot. These included showings for high school, college, and community groups of *The Late Epidemic*, a documentary film that enshrined itself as a movement staple. The film, distributed by Physicians for Social Responsibility, detailed the horrific effects of a hypothetical nuclear detonation on the San Francisco area. But this same fear of atomic conflagration that freeze proponents used to stir up legions at the grass roots also attracted another element to the movement—establishment arms control advocates. In California, the millionaire businessman and former anti-Vietnam War activist Harold Willens infused the campaign with copious cash and new tactics, hiring media consultants and mobilizing direct mail marketers to sway public opinion, leverage endorsements, raise money, and get Californians to sign the petition. As it would prove in the freeze campaign as a whole, this influx of professionalism in California was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, the California freeze rustled up more than seven hundred thousand signatures to gain a spot on the November ballot. On the other hand, to secure such broad-based support, Willens pushed to add language assuring Californians that the proposal mandated U.S. verification of Soviet compliance, thus erasing any potential qualms about unilateralism. Willens also prevailed in deleting language calling for redirecting funds slated for nuclear arms toward social uses, a measure that polls suggested might cost Proposition 12 close to 10 percent of voters. The strategy of maximizing support by making the ballot language as "inoffensive" and "free from peace rally rhetoric" as possible undermined its moral critique of militarism. The quest to make the freeze palatable to the mainstream both encouraged its great vitality at the grass roots and

ultimately weakened its impact as national policy.

Willens's involvement in the successful California campaign also signified a sea change in the style of mass democratic activism in the 1980s. Kehler, the freeze's national coordinator and also a veteran of 1960s anti-Vietnam War activism, recalled Willens's advice when the two first met: if the movement was to succeed, it needed to "scrap the 1960s retreads."<sup>10</sup> This comment spoke to the perceived need amid the more conservative 1980s political terrain to mute the roles of veteran activists like Kehler, who had cut their teeth on the previous generation's activist movements—in their place, to play for a more professionalized, clean-cut middle-class sensibility to maximize mainstream appeal. Though the strategic experience of 1960s veterans was vital to the freeze campaign, Willens's advice was largely heeded in the movement's public presentation.

The movement's public influence peaked in 1982. In March, the Vermont town meetings were once again the site of democratic ferment and national media attention. Of the state's 180 towns, 150 passed resolutions calling on their senators and representatives to urge the president to propose to the Soviets a mutual and verifiable freeze on nuclear weapons testing, production, and deployment.<sup>11</sup> Once again at issue in the Vermont deliberations was the legitimacy of small-town politics as a forum for national security matters. In Cornwall, Vermont, the proposed article appeared on the town meeting agenda between measures calling for a new furnace in the firehouse and the purchase of land to make a parking lot for the town hall.<sup>12</sup> One resident claimed that the freeze resolution was his best chance as "one citizen" to "send a message to our elected officials" for the United States and the Soviets to cease adding to nuclear stockpiles that are "set on triggers, ready to go off." Others dissented. One retired army colonel argued, "It is pretty silly for us to be advising the country on foreign policy, though he conceded the freeze's appeal. In Northfield, Vermont, where the measure lost by a single vote, one opponent contended that "it is very presumptuous for people to send a message to the President suggesting how we should conduct the foreign policy of this country." Yet a Newfane businessman, in a flourish of political metaphysics, eloquently elucidated a counterargument: "To reverse the trend toward nuclear warfare is a voyage of a million miles. Like all voyages, it starts with a single step. This town meeting is a place to take that first step." Patty Seubert, nuclear freeze coordinator for Addison County, Vermont, concurred, citing the long-standing tradition of the petition as an "effective force" for addressing national issues "even when it's operating at the very bottom rung of the political ladder."<sup>13</sup>

This latter position won out as momentum at the grass roots surged through 1982. Though freeze support found a heavy concentration in New England, the mid-Atlantic states, and the West Coast—the "usual suspects" of left/liberal activism—the movement gained traction with Americans of all ages and social classes, with additional pockets of support in the Midwest, Colorado, and even the South. Indeed, freeze support had a knack for cropping up in unusual places.<sup>14</sup> In Nebraska, the state with the third-highest percentage supporting Reagan's 1984 reelection, the Omaha freeze chapter conducted petition campaigns against the MX missile, organized freeze walks, ran freeze voter workshops, and sponsored an array of pro-freeze speakers. In Lincoln, a highly active chapter addressed the arms crisis from a decidedly Nebraskan perspective. It appealed to locals by linking increased military spending under Reagan with cuts to agricultural programs, and it argued that with money freed from the arms race to help American farmers, the resulting increased production of U.S. food exports could relieve hunger and promote security around the globe, concluding, "What a boon for American agriculture!" The Oklahoma freeze introduced educational and electoral strategies that reflected local politics as well, arranging screenings of *The Day After*, leafleting the Billy Graham Crusade, and holding a freeze walk that was praised as a "pioneer effort in fundraising for

disarmament in a conservative state.”<sup>15</sup>

The campaign even generated a respectable level of support in the traditionally conservative and pro-military South. This support was strongest in the economically depressed states of the border south such as West Virginia and Arkansas, where Pentagon spending was minimal. Invoking Dwight Eisenhower’s eloquent warning that national security is the “total product” of economic, intellectual, moral, and military strengths, and that while “absolute security” can never be attained, a nation can easily become “bankrupt” in “attempting to reach that goal through arms alone,” the West Virginia freeze campaign prepared a Jobs with Peace Budget, delivered in a well-crafted pamphlet that connected the state’s dire economic predicament to Reagan administration defense spending going amok. Rejecting the pursuit of defense largesse to bolster the Mountain State’s vitality, the pamphlet affirmed, “Our future lies in a strong civilian economy” and not in “Star Wars schemes of laser weapons and particle beams.” Even in the heart of the former Confederacy, where post-World War II Dixie politicians built careers on luring military bases and contracts to the region, the freeze managed to scare up a modicum of support. In North Carolina, home to Fort Bragg and Camp Lejeune, freeze petitions gathered forty thousand signatures and won approval from seven cities. A statewide resolution passed the North Carolina house but was defeated by a single vote in the senate. Perhaps its most important symbolic victory came when the North Carolina freeze won the support of the Tarheels’ legendary basketball coach, Dean Smith, who filmed a series of television messages on its behalf. Even in the Deep South, three different Alabama freeze groups labored to spread the word. Invoking the arms race’s threat to planetary security, the increasing likelihood of a nuclear accident, and the economic drain on the state’s citizenry caused by runaway defense spending and its accompanying high tax burden.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, pockets of ardent support in the heartland and in the South did not change the fact that these areas remained fundamentally conservative and in many ways reflected movement leader perception of public support as “a mile wide and an inch deep.” But this widely scattered support also gave the freeze movement widespread visibility and conveyed that it was not limited to bleeding heart liberals in the North. Geographic diversity at the grass roots enhanced its legitimacy as a national movement with the strength to put freeze referenda on the ballot in nine states in November 1982. One organizer pointed out how even in a small state—where putting such a measure on a statewide ballot would have cost many hundreds of thousands of dollars—hearty volunteer support at the grass roots “substituted human labor and energy for a lack of financial capital.” Door-to-door canvassing campaigns allowed a level of coverage and pro-freeze educational activity that a “couple of peace bureaucrats sitting alone in an office” never could have done.<sup>17</sup> As grassroots ferment crested at home, it was paralleled and fueled by a fervent movement across the pond.

## **European Peace Activism**

Americans who joined the freeze movement were not the only ones alarmed at Ronald Reagan’s sabre rattling in the early 1980s. Europeans voiced concern early and acted quickly, since Europe loomed as the most likely battleground for a prospective U.S.-Soviet nuclear confrontation that many forecast as World War III. Europeans’ uneasiness with their security had roots in the Carter administration’s 1979 decision, with the lukewarm assent of NATO’s European members, to deploy hundreds of intermediate-range nuclear missiles, including the notorious Pershing II’s, in five European countries. But with Reagan’s more strident Cold Warrior rhetoric, the chance of nuclear war appeared much

larger to the United States's Western European allies. While Carter played both ends against the middle, simultaneously deploying Euromissiles and negotiating with the Soviets for reduction, Reagan casually discussed the possibility of a limited exchange of tactical weapons "without bringing either one of the major powers to pushing the button." His secretary of state, Alexander Haig, remarked that NATO contingency plans for deterring a Soviet incursion on Western Europe included the option of exploding a nuclear warhead as a "demonstration."<sup>18</sup> Though administration officials swiftly backtracked from these provocative comments, their tone nevertheless alarmed European ears. The West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt dubbed American foreign policy makers "nuclear cowboys."<sup>19</sup> In response to the perceived threat, grassroots peace movements sprang up throughout Europe. These movements mobilized great masses of Europeans for demonstrations against the dangers of nuclear weapons, and in 1981 and 1982 hundreds of thousands turned out for rallies in Bonn, London, Paris, Rome, and Amsterdam as Europeans were energized, or frightened, into disarmament activism.<sup>20</sup>

Across Europe, mass rallies were accompanied by sustained activism. The leading British disarmament group, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) saw its membership flourish from nine thousand in 1980 to more than a hundred thousand in 1985. Like Americans, British peace activists reacted to the rise of a stalwart Cold Warrior—the "Iron Lady," Margaret Thatcher. Britain's first woman prime minister, Thatcher steadfastly opposed Soviet Communism and supported the Euromissile deployment. CND members, when surveyed about why they joined the movement, often responded with one of two replies: "Thatcher" or "Reagan." British disarmament forces resembled their American cousins demographically as well, receiving disproportionate support from the educated, professional sector of society.<sup>21</sup> Though students and young Britons played a greater role in the U.K. movement than their U.S. counterparts, the political Left and women played an important role in both, with blue-collar workers notably absent. Like freeze activists in the United States, CND supporters focused on the dangers of nuclear arms, avoiding divisive distractions and partisan rancor by embracing single-issue coalition politics. Unlike the freeze proposal, which called for "mutually verifiable" action by the United States and the Soviets, the CND hoped unilateral action by the West would catalyze Soviet disarmament through the court of world public opinion, yet it embraced bilateralism as well when strategy dictated.

Closely linked to the CND, European Nuclear Disarmament (END) strove to coordinate the wide-ranging disarmament activities throughout Europe and took inspiration from the philosophical and intellectual guidance of E. P. Thompson. The renowned author of the seminal history *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson, a fifty-four-year-old scholar and Left activist at the time of END's creation, emblemized the professional intelligentsia's leadership role in European disarmament. Thompson, a former Communist Party member after World War II and a pioneering Marxist historian, left the party in the 1950s and sought a resolution to the Cold War that eschewed the perspective of both superpowers. He proved a trenchant critic of both Communist repression—arguing that peace and liberty must go hand in hand—and U.S. militarism. His "Appeal for European Nuclear Disarmament," which launched END in 1980, highlighted this equal opportunity for ladling out blame. "Guilt lies squarely on both parties," END's founding statement contended, underscoring that both the United States and the Soviets "have adopted menacing postures and committed aggressive actions in different parts of the world."<sup>22</sup> Thompson and END argued that rather than waiting for these two nuclear giants to either disarm themselves or actually use the bombs in a "limited" nuclear war that seemed "increasingly likely," Europeans needed to launch a "third path to peace," independent of the two superpowers. Thompson galvanized an aggressive, well-coordinated

and nonaligned peace movement across the continent to wage “détente from below.”<sup>23</sup> To END, this meant energizing an independent grassroots movement, led by professionals and citizens with specialized disarmament expertise, that would bridge Eastern and Western Europe, and calling for the removal of nuclear weapons from the continent in the most expedient way possible, either unilaterally or bilaterally. Thompson and END left wide latitude for groups representing a range of goals, tactics, and strategies to get involved, suggesting, “We do not wish to impose any uniformity on the movement.”<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, an eclectic array of European groups joined the cause.

The Greenham Common women were among the most memorable. In September 1981 a group of thirty-six women called Women for Life on Earth marched from Cardiff, Wales, to Greenham Common, in Berkshire, England, home to an air force base where ninety-six cruise missiles were slated for deployment. Demonstrating great urgency, the Greenham Common women intervened using direct action tactics, launching a protest that ultimately lasted nineteen years. The women made an immediate demand—a television debate on nuclear weapons with the British government—suggesting a larger desire to educate and publicize the cause of disarmament. When this demand failed, several women remained at the base, importing tents, cooking utensils, and bedding, until they established a “permanent peace camp.” With the peace camp established, the women stepped up efforts to disrupt business as usual. Nonviolent resistance was common beginning in March 1982, when 250 women blockaded the base, resulting in thirty-four arrests. As though in reprisal for the heightened civil disobedience, local police commenced efforts to evict the women, initiating a “cat and mouse” game with the local district council that lasted more than a decade. The Greenham Common women proved resilient, however, and the original peace camp sprouted into several decentralized encampments around the base. In December 1982, thirty thousand women showed up to “Embrace the Base,” linking arms to surround the nine-mile perimeter fence and create a consummately media-friendly event.

Though many of the Greenham Common women were linked to the CND, the women’s protest broached larger cultural issues than the technical and practical considerations that often dominated disarmament activism. The protest at Greenham Common reflected an awareness of women’s traditionally strong role in peace movements and also incorporated ideas of contemporary feminism. This was evident in its February 1982 decision to become a female-only peace camp. A press release announcing the move cited women’s initiative in conceiving the project and the desire to safeguard women’s roles as its primary leaders and decision makers. Though the organizers carefully sought to preserve an off-site role for sympathetic men, the decision to make the peace camp women-only resonated with the feminist movement’s ideal of self-determination and its critique of power relations between the sexes. “We said we want to achieve something for ourselves and by ourselves,” the activist Sarah Hopkins contended. “If men are at the camp it will be assumed they did it all.”<sup>25</sup> The remarks demonstrated the Greenham women’s concern with how their protest would “play” to the media.

Their deft approach to public relations indicated that they could do more than simply oppose the siting of a bevy of cruise missiles in rural England. Rather, through its numerous symbolic actions at the Greenham air base, the group succeeded in dramatizing larger ideas about how to achieve a peaceful society and women’s role in that transformation. In the Embrace the Base action, the women not only encircled the fence, they adorned it with “gifts” designed to “symbolize life”—from flowers and paintings to pictures of babies and embroidery and newly planted daffodil bulbs. Other symbolic statements at Greenham Common included two hundred women dressed as furry animals and teddy bears, trespassing on military grounds for a protest picnic, and a 1983 reprise of encircling the base, this time holding up mirrors to reflect the image of nuclear peril and militarism back at the base itself.

Though the Greenham Common women represented a level of direct action and symbolic politics that was largely absent from the American freeze and disarmament movements, they were aware of developments on the other side of the Atlantic. Embrace the Base, for instance, had been adapted from a similar women's action at the Pentagon. At one point the Greenham Common women, along with two U.S. congressmen, actually sued President Reagan, arguing that the deployment of cruise missiles on British soil was unconstitutional. Though the suit proved unsuccessful, its existence demonstrated how, during the early 1980s, the Greenham women and European disarmament activists intertwined with freeze representatives and American pro-disarmament forces transatlantically, creating an atmosphere of ferment in opposition to nuclear weapons.

The U.S. freeze movement was in close contact with END and with European groups focused on eliminating the Euromissiles. Though the American movement was more domestically oriented than its European counterpart, and sometimes Europeans registered frustration with the Yanks for insufficient focus on eradicating the Euromissiles that imperiled European life and limb, there was considerable connection and collaboration. European and American speakers ventured back and forth across the Atlantic continuously, sharing reports of their respective movements' activities and inspiring globally minded disarmament activism in the locales they visited. Whenever possible, specific rallies and demonstrations were coordinated between the American and European movements. There were structural connections through the International Peace Communication and Coordination Center—which met four times annually in various European cities—and representatives from disarmament organizations in the United States and Europe. Though both movements viewed the state-sponsored Soviet-aligned peace movements of Eastern Europe warily, preferring to parcel out blame for the Cold War's nuclear escalation in equal measures to both superpowers, the European movement proved able to fashion a more thoroughgoing critique of the militarism on both sides, while the American freeze hewed to a tight policy agenda, hoping for incremental progress.<sup>26</sup> The sheer presence of this growing international coalition figured among the factors propelling the issue to the forefront of American domestic politics. It wasn't long before national politicians began regarding the freeze proposal opportunistically.

## **The Freeze on the National Stage**

In February 1982 the Massachusetts representative Edward Markey, a Democrat, sensing political advantage from allying with the freeze movement, introduced a resolution to the House. Shortly thereafter, Ted Kennedy, already eyeing the 1984 Democratic presidential nomination, introduced a similar measure in the Senate, gaining bipartisan sponsorship from the Republican senator Max Baucus of Oregon. Deliberations and debate, jockeying and lobbying proceeded apace in Congress. Popular momentum for the proposal surged. The June Central Park rally generated a largely positive wave of national media coverage. Reports noted its broad-based support among the 750,000 participants and praised its "orderliness" and good manners. Favorable comparisons with 1960s-era protests abounded, with observers applauding the lack of animosity among the protesters and the spirit of antinuclear consensus: "It's not just the hippies and crazies anymore," a demonstrator told *The New York Times*. "It's everybody." On the other coast, in Pasadena, California, 85,000 music-loving antinuclears jammed the Rose Bowl for a "Peace Sunday: We Have a Dream" benefit that, like the Central Park rally, was timed to coincide with the U.N. special session on disarmament. Peace Sunday was the largest benefit to that point, and it anticipated mid-1980s "mega-events" from Live Aid

Band Aid to Farm Aid. Graham Nash assembled the performers, who ranged from musicians with prior antinuclear credentials such as Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt, and Dan Fogelberg to 1960s protest music veterans Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. While singing familiar peace anthems such as “Teach Your Children” and “Give Peace a Chance,” together they raised a quarter of a million dollars. Even the macho ironic posturing of Van Halen’s David Lee Roth—who stood on the sidelines and quipped, “I’d agree to a freeze, but I’d tell our guys to stash a few on our side”—could not derail the day’s buoyed spirits and heady optimism.<sup>27</sup>

That November the broad-based support was evident at the polls as voters in Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, New Jersey, North Dakota, Oregon, and Rhode Island approved freeze resolutions by substantial margins. Even in California, where Reagan administration officials went on a speaking tour to oppose the freeze referendum and a shoestring citizens group called Californians for a Strong America mobilized the Federal Communications Commission’s fairness doctrine to air an anti-freeze ad starring Charlton Heston, the freeze campaign still eked out a 52 percent to 48 percent victory. Nationwide, a total of eighteen million Americans weighed in on the question, with freeze resolutions garnering 60 percent support. In Congress, pro-freeze forces picked up twenty-six votes, a development that allowed a freeze resolution to pass overwhelmingly in May 1983, erasing the narrow failure of an earlier version the previous August. With political pundits stressing that the Reagan administration now faced the choice of whether to “exploit this strong popular tide” or to ignore it at its own peril,<sup>28</sup> freeze proponents might have basked in their own elation. But far from ushering in a new era of enhanced impact on weapons policy, this success only portended the beginning of the end.

So how did such an auspicious victory lead to a quick demise? The answer lies in the late Cold War politics that permeated the rhetoric of freeze opponents. One key anti-freeze argument was that a halt to weapons testing, production, and deployment would leave the Soviets in a position of strategic advantage. Echoing 1950s anticommunist invective, critics from the arms control establishment and outside commentators lambasted freeze proponents for their naïveté. The prominent conservative William F. Buckley ridiculed freeze supporters as Communist dupes and speculated that Soviet propagandists conjured support for the freeze in much the same way as ad execs hyped consumer baubles. Reagan himself went so far as to blame the freeze on “foreign agents,” who, desiring “the weakening of America,” manipulated unwitting activists, though in a conciliatory gesture the president conceded that a majority of pro-freeze Americans were “sincere and well-intentioned.”<sup>29</sup>

Just as the freeze neared its apex, it suffered a number of ironic disappointments. Simplicity had won the movement its widespread following and generated considerable bipartisan support in Congress. By the middle of 1982 many legislators scrambled to get behind a freeze proposal for their own political advantage. Yet they were also mindful that though polls demonstrated that a majority of the public supported a freeze, the same polls also revealed that most Americans did not want to freeze a Soviet advantage in place. Competing attempts to find politically palatable resolution language proliferated. Conservatives introduced their own version of a “freeze,” which would occur only after both sides completed major reductions to achieve parity. This approach co-opted the politically popular term “freeze” but reversed its original intent as a first step toward nuclear disarmament, earning it the sobriquet “phony freeze” from movement activists. Another version made the freeze conditional upon first catching up to the Soviets from a presumed weapons deficit. Such nuance allowed politicians to reap the benefits of the politically “hot” freeze label while maintaining a loophole allowing for military modernization and the development of new weapons systems that left their credentials as Cold Warriors intact. The eventual result was that in May 1983 Congress passed a watered-down resolution fraught with contingencies and compromise. The resolution was not binding

only weapons for which both superpowers could agree to verification terms would be frozen, and even then it was revocable if negotiated arms reductions failed to follow within a specified time limit. To the activist community that had launched the campaign with hopes of spawning a larger movement against militarism and nuclear peril, this “freeze” amounted to small recompense. Adding insult to injury, within a few weeks after this vote, which observers claimed “reflected less the strength of support for the freeze than the ambiguity of the resolution,” the House and Senate decisively approved funding for Reagan’s controversial MX missile, underscoring the impotence of the measure’s final incarnation.<sup>30</sup>

After the state resolution victories in November 1982, one observer had predicted that as a “canny” politician, Reagan would not turn a political tin ear toward the growing din, but rather would work toward more effective arms control to counter the movement’s popular appeal. This forecast proved accurate, if in unexpected ways. In a March 1983 televised address, the president outlined his case for increased defense spending, arguing that defense was “not about spending arithmetic,” but rather about seeking security through preparedness to meet all threats. Reagan mocked the freeze idea by citing the Soviets’ ongoing deployment of SS-20 missiles despite Premier Leonid Brezhnev’s pledge to cease and desist. With characteristic movie star aplomb, Reagan quipped, “Some freeze!,” scorning the idea of taking Soviet promises to disarm at face value. Reagan did acknowledge the sincerity and breadth of the movement: “I know too that many of you seriously believe that a nuclear freeze would further the cause of peace.” Yet after giving the freeze its due, he quickly underscored the shortcomings that he believed prohibited its adoption, citing problems with verification and arguing that it would reward the Soviets for their military buildup and hamper U.S. military modernization. Then Reagan unveiled the evening’s major surprise. Lamenting the Cold War–era ideology of national security based on deterrence, massive retaliation, and mutually assured destruction as “a sad commentary on the human condition,” he speculated, “What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack?” Reagan proceeded to sketch out plans for a Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) that, through massive mobilization of technology and resources, would produce the capability to intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached American soil. The immense technical challenges of such a program, acknowledged by the president himself, caused opponents and proponents alike to dub the project “Star Wars,” evoking a greater connection to science fantasy than to reality.

Despite a tenuous relationship with the landscape of possibility, Star Wars dealt a serious blow to the freeze movement. Like the diluted congressional resolutions, Star Wars managed to steal the movement’s thunder by addressing and redirecting some of its key concerns. Where the freeze campaign had gained popularity by stressing the danger of nuclear weapons, suddenly Reagan was offering a space shield that would make such weapons obsolete. The SDI idea allowed Reagan to claim the moral high ground by using language indicating that he too was looking forward to a world without nuclear weapons and to the end of the Cold War. This bit of turnabout let the wind out of the movement’s sails as the Reagan administration seized the initiative in matters of defense and disarmament.<sup>31</sup>

Yet from another angle, even if its momentum had ebbed, the freeze movement had achieved a discernible impact. The grassroots coalition spearheaded the disarmament activism that created the political climate that encouraged Reagan to sign the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, removing the provocative cruise and Pershing II missiles from Europe. Its meteoric rise energized the broader public climate and ultimately pressured Reagan—who boasted of his opposition to every arm



control agreement before the freeze movement—to weigh in with proposals for reductions of his own. That these proposals were motivated by a desire to assuage domestic critics rather than a genuine wish for international rapprochement proved less relevant than the reality that it opened the door for the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, to pursue reductions and a reawakening of détente. The freeze debate successfully eroded the nuclear priesthood's aura of expertise and opened up national discourse on disarmament and national security policy. Furthermore, it set limits on the aggression and scope of the Reagan administration's Cold War rhetoric and ambition, and it restored an environment of bipartisan consensus on arms control in national politics. Though the arms control establishment and the Reagan administration viewed the end of the Cold War as a testament to “peace through strength” caused by an arms race that created debilitating financial pressures on the Soviet Union, it is equally true that the freeze campaign coalesced at the center of a growing popular call to end nuclear escalation in the 1980s, facilitating international cooperation and negotiations and diffusing hostilities. Finally, the freeze emerged as a tremendous recruiting effort, bringing thousands of new people into lifelong activism on behalf of what one movement leader called “a safer, saner, more just and peaceful world.”<sup>32</sup>

That said, it would be a mistake to paint too rosy a picture of the movement's achievements. After all, nuclear weapons production and deployment were not halted, and in fact, several new weapon systems were introduced after the movement fizzled in the wake of Reagan's 1984 reelection. Despite its potency at the grass roots, a lack of militancy undermined the cause. This was most evident in the movement's reluctance to use direct action tactics at strategic moments in conjunction with its legislative agenda. Though the national media was quick to congratulate freeze activists for their lack of 1960s-style rancor, this very politeness left a gaping hole in anything that might have resembled a radical wing of the movement. There was no one left to pressure national politicians into making concessions to movement moderates. Furthermore, the narrow focus on the freeze as a simple first step toward an eventual larger disarmament campaign jettisoned much of the larger philosophical and ideological rationale in public discussion. Ultimately this left the substance behind the freeze vulnerable to the machinations of national politicians in Congress for whom nuclear disarmament played second fiddle to their own political advancement. Though a high proportion of freeze supporters were critical of U.S. foreign and military policy as a whole, the movement avoided engaging larger questions regarding the connections between the arms race, Reagan administration militarism, and Cold War interventionism. It was left to a smaller and more radical Central American solidarity movement to address those issues.

# THE CENTRAL AMERICA SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT

## Opposing Secret Wars in the Backyard

Collapsed in smoking ruins near the Nicaraguan town of Jalapa, the tobacco farm marked a scene of human misery. Civilian casualties included an infant, two toddlers, and a grandmother, victims of attacks by Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries, or “contras.” The contras set up bases in Honduras and launched cross-border offensives to destabilize the leftist Sandinista government and reverse the 1979 revolution that ousted Anastasio Somoza Debayle, ending a repressive U.S.-backed family dynasty that dated back to the 1930s. The tobacco farm targeted in this 1983 attack was no accident. The contras systematically wreaked havoc on signs of economic activity, fledgling social institutions, and community development that the Sandinistas might claim as successes to buttress their legitimacy. Even at the time of the attack, U.S. support, sponsorship, and training of the contras was a secret kept poor enough for *Newsweek* to have run a cover story on America’s “Secret War for Nicaragua.”

News of the contras’ distressingly routine deeds of terror, torture, and murder reached the ears of many American citizens who were disinclined to trust their purportedly benign purposes. Ronald Reagan referred to the contras as “freedom fighters,” and characterized them as heroic combatants in a vital Cold War struggle to eradicate the Soviet Union’s pernicious influence from America’s backyard. Delegations of the skeptical, many of whom believed that the Sandinistas’ intentions had more to do with ending oligarchic rule and leveling the playing field of Nicaraguan society, felt sufficiently compelled to journey down to Central America to see for themselves. One group investigated the tobacco farm shortly after the attack. Scanning the carnage and rubble lining the mountainous terrain, they noticed a contra command post just over the Honduran border and wondered why the firing had ceased. A young Nicaraguan soldier floated the idea that the Americans’ presence acted as a deterrent to further contra attacks. There was a logic to this. If the Reagan administration was funding the contras, it made sense that attacks would stop with the risk of spilling American blood, since the public outrage this would spark in the United States might threaten further contra aid. In a lightbulb moment, Jefferson Boyer, an anthropologist from North Carolina who had worked for the Peace Corps in Honduras in the 1960s, piped up, “If all it takes to stop this killing is to get a bunch of Americans down here, then let’s do it,” and called for fifteen hundred gringo volunteers to stop the fighting.<sup>1</sup>

This insight gave birth to Witness for Peace, a group of committed volunteers who set up a long-term vigil that offered their bodies and presence as a “shield of love” to deter contra offensive. Shorter-term volunteers journeyed to Central America to observe the contras in action, witness the atrocities and misery caused with the complicity of covert U.S. training and economic aid, and then report what they had seen stateside to pressure the Reagan administration to modify its interventionist policies. Though Witness for Peace represented high-stakes direct action politics to the hilt—

willingness and even a desire to “share the danger” with the Nicaraguan people threatened by continued attacks—it also embodied many of the ideas, ideals, and tactics of the larger Central American solidarity movement that comprised the cutting edge of opposition to Reagan administration policies in the region.

Witness for Peace’s activities shed light on how Central Americans helped shape the response to U.S. policy. The close interplay between Central and North Americans epitomized the movement’s sense of solidarity. The tenacity of Witness for Peace also illustrated the willingness of ordinary citizens to take on the difficult and often unpopular task of opposing a popular president in a foreign policy area he repeatedly stressed as central to national interests. In Nicaragua, this meant contesting activities that were part of covert rather than official U.S. foreign policy, which necessitated waging a battle for legitimacy in American public discussion of Central America. Witness for Peace also symbolized one of the Central America movement’s unique attributes: the role of religion and faith in a struggle for social justice at a time when Christianity was typically harnessed to more conservative social purposes.

Compared with the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign or Greenpeace activism, the Central America movement was relatively small, consisting of a core of about twenty thousand people. Despite this, the movement compiled an impressive record of accomplishment under often adverse circumstances. Though poverty and violence still exist in the region, the solidarity movement profoundly altered the course of events in Central America during the 1980s. For one thing, it helped to prevent a full-scale war in Nicaragua that loomed as a real possibility despite the national wariness of avoiding another costly and divisive war—that is, “another Vietnam.” Though this “Vietnam syndrome” hung heavy, the historian Van Gosse has argued for an alternative meaning of the phrase, suggesting that the real Vietnam syndrome was the establishment of a durable foreign policy opposition that began in the 1960s, its roots in the Vietnam antiwar movement, and that solidified with activism opposing the U.S. role in the 1973 Chilean coup, enduring in a potent anti-interventionist force that contested U.S. attempts to wage the Cold War in an array of Third World outposts. The Central America movement drew from this anti-interventionist tradition. It forged allegiances with Democratic members of Congress that were fraught with compromise, but nevertheless it created a robust coalition that forced the Reagan administration to fight through proxies, underwrite covert military training and economic support, and align itself with forces on the wrong side of human rights abuses. This led to the politically crippling Iran-Contra Affair, which sounded the death knell for the ardent Central American interventionism the Reagan administration’s foreign policy had foregrounded. North Americans’ visits to Central America, in delegations such as those sponsored by Witness for Peace, paved the way for the revelations of Iran-Contra by providing alternate accounts of events on the ground in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. The movement used mainstream and leftist media to plant a seed of doubt with the American public about official praise for the contras as national liberators and the labeling of the Salvadoran death squads as “counterterrorists.” Further, the movement ameliorated the damage caused to Central American civilians by the contras and the death squads, with their well-demonstrated record of human rights abuses. By the end of the decade, the movement had generated a plethora of Central American solidarity organizations that provided a model of transnational cooperation with the United States and southern neighbors.<sup>2</sup>

## **“Inevitable” Revolutions?**

During the 1980s, Cold War rhetoric tinted U.S. involvement in Central America, but heavy-handed Yankee activity there was nothing new. The first major statement of U.S. foreign policy in the region, the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, implied future American dominance even as its ostensible purpose was to warn European powers not to meddle in the Western Hemisphere. In the early twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt, emboldened by burgeoning U.S. industrial and economic power, tacked on an amendment to the Monroe Doctrine. The 1904 Roosevelt Corollary upped the ante for U.S. influence and power in Latin America by providing an explicit rationale for American intervention in the region. Seeking to codify the dominant relationship that had already emerged and to secure operations in the area of the Panama Canal then under construction, Roosevelt reasoned that the United States was the natural protector of the other geographically, economically, and militarily smaller and less powerful nations in the region. Appropriating the language of Progressive Era reformers, Roosevelt argued that the frequent revolutions that beset Latin America were “inefficient” and potentially threatening to American interests, and thus should be subject to American power. Subtly reversing the meaning of the Monroe Doctrine, which discouraged European intervention in the Western Hemisphere, Roosevelt’s Corollary provided a rationale for the United States to intervene in Latin America. Armed with this “Big Stick,” the United States took this opening time and time again throughout the twentieth century.

Sometimes this involved flexing military muscles, such as the occupation of Nicaragua from the 1910s to the 1930s, multiple troop mobilizations in Honduras during the 1920s, and, most notoriously, the CIA-aided Guatemala coup in 1954 in which U.S. planes heavily bombed Guatemala City. Yet underlying these military actions was a fundamental economic interconnectedness between the United States and Central America, a relationship of dependency that kept the region perpetually impoverished, weak, and subject to the whims of landed oligarchies and U.S.-backed dictators. This was not accidental. Rather, it represented a highly evolved system in which American economic business, and strategic interests dominated Central American life without the hassle of imposing direct imperial or administrative control. In this system, the region’s diminutive nations became “banana republics,” their economies dependent on one or two key export crops, such as coffee, sugar, or—fittingly—bananas. The industries based on these crops were typically controlled by major U.S. corporate players—the behemoth United Fruit Company, for example—and by local elites, leaving the Central American masses perennially vulnerable to the vicissitudes of foreign markets. The historian Walter LaFeber has argued that under these conditions, the outbreak of discontent and revolutionary sentiment among the poverty-stricken Central American masses was all but inevitable. Over the course of the twentieth century, whenever revolutionary ferment cropped up, imperiling the bonds of economic dependency, it marked the tipping point for the United States to use military force.<sup>4</sup>

Though the 1954 Guatemala coup epitomizes this formula for applying military force in Central America, the landscape in which these decisions were made took on a different cast in the post-Vietnam era. By the 1980s, national squeamishness about fighting the Cold War in Third World venues or spilling American blood for debatable purposes still weighed heavily on the populace. The Reagan administration pursued its goal of restoring national power in an environment where public opinion urged avoiding direct interventions abroad and their concomitant casualties. In this context, the doctrine of “low-intensity warfare” emerged as a way to counter insurgencies, promote American interests, and wage the Cold War in Central America. One fundamental tenet of this school of thought was to pay attention to the politics of Central American conflicts rather than strictly to the military situation. Tactics included generous economic aid to shore up “friendly” (i.e., non-leftist) regimes. United States policy also sought to isolate political regimes that were “unfriendly”—the Sandinist

in Nicaragua and opposition groups such as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador—while supporting allies such as the contras and El Salvador's Duarte government. One U.S. military official called it “total war at the grassroots level.” The strategy comprised a mélange of psychological warfare, harassment and intimidation of key opposition sympathizers at the local level and sabotage of economic activity and social reform. This was especially evident in Nicaragua, where the fledgling leftist Sandinista government sought to remake the country after decades of the Somoza regime's repression. Low-intensity warfare aimed to force the Central American people to arrive at a cost-benefit conclusion that supporting local opponents of U.S. policy was too painful to remain a viable option.

The signal feature of low-intensity warfare was its use of proxies to carry out a range of nefarious missions that avoided full-fledged attacks, evaded international media scrutiny, and sidestepped the politically and emotionally unpalatable possibility of American casualties. Thus “low-intensity warfare” referred to the idea that U.S. policy in Central America would be carried out without full military engagement, and with minimized cost in terms of American bloodshed. From the standpoint of Central American civilians, however, there was nothing low-intensity about it. Indeed, the impact on civilians was central to the strategy. Bombings, burnings of villages, forced evacuations, and scorched-earth crop destruction of designated areas sought to separate Sandinistas and Salvadoran guerrillas from their bases of civilian support. The Guatemalan military, banned from aid during the Carter years owing to an abysmal human rights record, nevertheless used loopholes to draw contracts and arms transfers under Reagan and precipitated the massacres of hundreds of thousands of indigenous people. Death squads targeted local figures suspected of cooperation with the guerrillas, leaving dismembered corpses on public display for a terrorized civilian population to consider. Mothers of the disappeared searched through spiral binders crammed with photos of mutilated casualties of political murders.

Despite grinding poverty and merciless repression, Central Americans on the wrong end of these assaults often transcended a stereotypical role as wretched victims. Faced with a limited range of choices, many Central Americans managed to mobilize what few resources were available to influence their northern neighbors to pressure their political leaders to stop the violence. The most powerful tactic was to tell their stories about experiences and conditions in their home countries to appeal to potentially sympathetic U.S. citizens who might in turn seek to change Reagan administration policy. These stories galvanized the Central America solidarity movement.

## **Sanctuary and the Faith-Based Movement**

In 1981, Jim Corbett, a Quaker goat rancher from Arizona, encountered tales of civil war, abduction, torture, and harrowing journeys across the Mexican border from Salvadoran refugees in the American Southwest. These refugees were desperately trying to avoid deportation at the hands of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the Border Patrol, since such a fate meant almost certain death squad assassination upon returning home to El Salvador. Central American refugees presented U.S. authorities with a sticky issue. Granting them political refugee status risked acknowledging that the U.S.-funded right-wing governments of El Salvador and Guatemala were sufficiently repressive to necessitate asylum for citizens on the wrong side of authority. This would undermine the image of benevolent U.S. aid. Instead, the INS routinely designated thousands of Central Americans as “economic refugees,” condemning them to deportation, violent reprisal, and

often gruesome executions for having fled their home countries in the first place. Many Central Americans were not even made aware of their right to petition for asylum. The majority of those who pursued a legal route to immigration through political refugee status were denied and ultimately deported despite their efforts, forfeiting hefty bond payments in the process. John Fife, a Tucson clergyman, remarked that the legal defense efforts were “neither effective nor moral” and therefore made no sense to continue them.<sup>7</sup>

Faced with what they viewed as a moral imperative to help Central American refugees, Corbett, Fife, and others drew upon their religious backgrounds and activated the time-honored ideal of sanctuary. The moral outlook that enabled these clergy to harbor refugees illegally—a felony—galvanized what became the Sanctuary Movement, and culled from many sources. One minister feigning reluctant to break the law yet found conviction when he recalled how Jewish refugees during World War II were turned away from American shores and returned to the Nazis. The activist past of the 1960s also loomed large among the founders of Sanctuary. Fife was a veteran of civil rights—marches for desegregation and voting rights, and Corbett had counseled conscientious objectors. During the Vietnam War, dozens of American churches sheltered GI deserters who had concluded that further participation in the war contradicted their deepest values. Most immediately, American clergy were acquainted with the Salvadoran regime’s brutality, especially the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the vicious rapes and murders later that year of four American churchwomen who were administering food, clothing, and medical aid to the country’s poor. These killings not only sparked popular resistance in El Salvador, they also enlisted many in the American religious community who were shocked by the violence and inspired by the message of the victims whom they revered as martyrs.<sup>8</sup>

For Corbett, the die was cast. In violation of federal immigration law, he personally provided temporary shelter for Central American refugees on an ad hoc basis, leaving them with his friends and relatives, an act of civil disobedience energized by moral conscience. When Corbett exhausted the possibilities, he approached Fife, who persuaded his congregation to make available the Southside Presbyterian Church. This reprised the Vietnam-era practice of churches providing safe haven for conscientious objectors. Later in 1982, when the numbers of refugees exceeded the Tucson church community’s capacity, Corbett convinced the Chicago Religious Task Force (CRTF) on Central America to coordinate a national sanctuary movement. With the CRTF’s guidance, a new “underground railroad” movement for the twentieth century flourished, now no longer conducting runaway southern slaves across the Mason-Dixon line, but rather shepherding Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees to the safety of communities of worship. Ultimately, the network grew to more than three hundred congregations nationally, with thousands more endorsing and supporting the enterprise.<sup>9</sup>

Sanctuaries sprang up in a wide geographic scatterplot. From its beginnings in Tucson, the idea spread quickly over the next two years—to Chicago’s Wellington Avenue United Church of Christ; to more than two dozen congregations in the Berkeley, California, area; to Racine, Wisconsin; to New York City’s Riverside Church and its legendary peace activist pastor, William Sloane Coffin; and to more than three dozen Jewish synagogues across the country. At least a dozen cities, from Seattle to Santa Fe and from Los Angeles to Cambridge, Massachusetts, declared sanctuary, symbolizing solidarity with Central American refugees. More tangibly, these municipal sanctuaries offered the advantage of assuring that local police would not be mobilized to assist the INS in enforcing immigration law. An order of Benedictine monks from Weston Priory in Vermont welcomed a family of seven masked Guatemalans traveling under assumed names. Invoking the legacy of the

Underground Railroad, and linking the historical struggle of African Americans in solidarity with the plight of Central Americans in the 1980s, the national headquarters of Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH (People United to Serve Humanity) declared itself a sanctuary for a Salvadoran family of five. Justifying this action, Jackson hinted at the political undertones of this humanitarian act, speculating that if Americans had begun protesting the Vietnam War earlier, the country might have been spared the worst of that conflict's costs.<sup>10</sup>

In each of these locales, the Sanctuary Movement disseminated information about the miserable conditions the refugees faced in their home countries and the role of Reagan administration policy in their creation. In what was a standard ritual and strategy of this movement, the refugees retold their stories of danger and abuse, torture, mutilation, and death. At Chicago's Wellington Avenue Church, Juan, a Salvadoran refugee, recounted his apprehension and torture by the country's police while he was a student at the University of El Salvador. Juan enumerated the police's nefarious methods of torment. He insisted that his treatment was not due to his participation in student activism, but rather stemmed from the special knowledge he had gained during his previous career as a truck driver during which he had come across scores of mutilated bodies on the roads of El Salvador and Guatemala. He contended that these bodies had been placed so that cars and trucks would run over them and disguise the evidence of torture, making the deaths appear accidental. To persuade the Chicago parishioners that extending sanctuary to fleeing Central Americans was the right thing to do, Juan recalled a history of privation and suffering. But this was not solely a narrative of victimization. Rather, Juan's story, along with those of legions of Central Americans in the movement, functioned as a kind of "signal flare" to inform their northern neighbors about the effects of Reagan administration support for repressive regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala and the contras in Nicaragua, and to motivate them to agitate for an end to U.S. aid and intervention.

Adopting this strategy to frame their struggle as sympathetically as possible, Central Americans mobilized a language of symbolic politics through personal stories, religious testimony, and artistic and literary expressions, encouraging North Americans to visit Central America and see for themselves what conditions were like on the ground. The height of these efforts—the 1983 publication of the Quiche Indian Rigoberta Menchú's memoir—broadcast a gruesome history of oppression of indigenous Guatemalans and resistance internationally, attained a wide audience in American college classrooms, and propelled its author to the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. These accounts of injustice, upon reaching the United States, appealed to Americans' sense of moral high ground and national identity as a people who would not stand for egregious human rights abuses. As Juan put it, "That's part of why I'm here, to demonstrate that all of us must be willing, not just one person, to stop this suffering. It's a call."<sup>11</sup>

## **CISPES and the Secular Movement**

Though religiously oriented groups such as Sanctuary best illustrated Juan's call to exemplary moral action, the secular Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) functioned as the El Salvador solidarity movement's center throughout the 1980s. CISPES emerged at roughly the same time that the FMLN—a coalition of five opposition groups in El Salvador—was formed. From the beginning, there was an exchange of ideas and information between North American activists, FMLN rebels, and the Salvadoran exile community in the United States. Though stopping short of exercising direct control, as the State Department claimed, the FMLN did help initiate a national network

solidarity organizations (with CISPES as the most significant), update U.S. activists on the Salvadoran war, and facilitate visits and “accompaniments” to El Salvador through SHARE, the Salvadoran Humanitarian Aid, Relief, and Education Foundation, which aimed at the religious community and the more secular New El Salvador Today. These accompaniments were designed to repopulate areas in which the death squads had systematically eradicated civilians who might side with the rebels. In return, CISPES, which by 1988 had grown to 525 chapters and affiliates representing all fifty states, reciprocated with solidarity to the rebel cause in El Salvador.<sup>12</sup>

Given the leftist tendencies of the rebels, only American activists of a certain cast gravitated to CISPES. The “solidarity” in its title meant something more than mere nonintervention, which moderate activists could and did pursue through traditional politics, lobbying their congressional representatives to vote against aid to the Salvadoran regime. Indeed, CISPES was heir to the Vietnam era New Left’s critique not only of interventionist foreign policy but also of American imperialism. For instance, a CISPES informational brochure cited disingenuous elections “devised and imposed” to “legitimize the repressive Salvadoran junta and thus justify U.S. intervention”; phony land reform wherein “more peasants were assassinated than were receiving titles to land”; and “trumped up allegations” of “Soviet/Cuban/Nicaraguan interference” as uncanny parallels to the kinds of pretenses the United States proffered to justify escalation in Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> This El Salvador-as-Vietnam critique resonated powerfully in a country still ravaged by the physical and psychic scars of its longest and most unpopular war, and CISPES exploited these sentiments skillfully with the popular slogan “El Salvador Is Spanish for Vietnam.”

Embracing direct action tactics, CISPES mounted its first large-scale demonstration in 1982 as part of a coalition of dozens of activist groups that marched on the White House to protest the Reagan administration’s Salvadoran policy. A CISPES pamphlet for the protest, timed to coincide with elections for the Salvadoran assembly, invoked a classic leftist critique of American imperialism. The pamphlet noted that the elections were to be “supervised by the same Armed Forces responsible for 30,000 murders in the last two years” and claimed that the “entire electoral scheme was devised and imposed by the U.S. in an attempt to legitimize the repressive Salvadoran junta and thus justify U.S. intervention.” On the front lines, the demonstrators abbreviated this formulation to the chant “No Draft, No War, U.S. Out of El Salvador.” If the president’s El Salvador policy provided the immediate catalyst for this event, at least one student protestor perceived Reagan’s galvanizing effect on oppositional politics, quipping, “Ronald Reagan is the best organizer we have.” The protestors, who totaled twenty-three thousand by official tallies and significantly more by organizers’ reckonings, represented a range of organizations and thus bought into the anti-imperialist argument with varying degrees of conviction. But they embraced the common tactic of invoking Vietnam, citing fears of large-scale escalation and sons getting drafted. Media coverage proved quick to pick up on this theme, interviewing older demonstrators about the connections to Vietnam and asking leading questions about similarities between that day’s El Salvador protest and those of the Vietnam era.<sup>14</sup>

Though direct action remained a staple of CISPES activism throughout the decade, the organization doggedly pursued other, less rabble-rousing forms of solidarity. CISPES raised money for medical aid under the banner “Healing the Wounds of War” and promoted the development of alternative health care in rural areas abandoned by the Salvadoran government. Over the course of the decade, CISPES distributed more than one million dollars in humanitarian aid, including money for tools and agricultural seeds, as well as earthquake relief. Repudiating the Reagan administration’s version of its El Salvador policy in publications like its monthly newsletter, *El Salvador Alert*, remained a main point of emphasis. Beginning in 1986, a major focus was enhancing direct forms



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