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Roger Peace's *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign*. A review

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Roger Peace launches his treatise calling for a belated Presidential apology on behalf of the United States for its aggression in Nicaragua during the 1980's. Moreover, Peace contends that history should "properly identify" twentieth-century protagonists as those nonviolent activists resisting Soviet domination in Eastern Europe, those opposing apartheid in South Africa, and "those who challenged the U.S.-directed terrorist war against Nicaragua" (246). His tone may seem unsettling, but his thorough research and originality make for a superb historical examination on an often overlooked anti-war movement.

This is not another recounting of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations, nor is it a rehashing of U.S. support for contra resistance. Instead, Peace's work is an impressive analysis that organizes a decentralized anti-war network opposed to U.S. funding for the counterrevolutionaries into a coherent network. This is a "comprehensive historical account," of what Peace terms, the Anti-Contra War Campaign (ACWC) (5). The ACWC concept serves as the nexus for a social change movement that fought to cut off U.S. aid to the contras throughout the 1980's. These loosely-affiliated, grassroots organizations scattered throughout the United States and made-up of anti-war activists of all stripes (many seasoned Vietnam-era protestors), mobilized in order to educate the American public on the war's social consequences and to pressure Congress into denying Reagan's funding requests. Although the ACWC's defunding efforts were inconsistently

successful, the movement's transnational reach and political influence, Peace argues, was potent and persuasive.

Arguably the most influential anti-war movement since the Vietnam War, the ACWC has received only limited scholastic coverage. Out of the massive historiography on the Contra War and U.S.-Nicaraguan relations, only a "small number of scholarly studies" have given even a partial account of the ACWC (5). Those that have addressed the resistance generally focus on specific institutions or social groups. Peace credits Edward T. Brett's work with spotlighting the role of the American church in the resistance, and considers both Christian Smith's *Resisting Reagan* and Robert E. Surbrug's *Beyond Vietnam* as valuable segues into understanding the ACWC.¹ Peace's historiographical contribution rests with his capacity to consolidate the limited historiography with the substantial, undeveloped history. Andrew Hunt, author of *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War*, believes Peace's comprehensive work is, at a minimum, beneficial in refuting dominant Reagan triumphalism by proving the 1980s were as fraught with protest as the 1960s.

Segmented into eight chapters and a conclusion, the first three chapters familiarize the reader with a post-Vietnam atmosphere that was wary of war, but fearful of communist influence in Latin America. Newly elected President Reagan took a decidedly different approach from his predecessor by engaging directly in anti-communist activities in Nicaragua. Drawing on both government materials and secondary publications, Peace argues that the U.S. government's decision to move into Nicaragua was an attempt to recover lost credibility in Vietnam. This recovery effort collided with a decentralized anti-war movement. The ACWC comprised of groups, such as leftists, New Liberation theologians, and the American Friends Service Committee, arose to challenge Reagan's Cold War narrative with arguments for Nicaraguan sovereignty and testimonies recounting counterrevolutionaries' human rights violations.

¹ Edward T. Brett, "The Attempts of Grassroots Religious Groups to Change U.S. Policy Towards Central America: Their Methods, Successes, and Failures" (*Journal of Church and State*, August 1991). Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central American Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Robert E. Surbrug, *Beyond Vietnam: The Politics of Protest in Massachusetts, 1974-1990* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

Peace's hard work is most evident in chapters four through six. Peace recounts in incredible detail the most formidable years of ACWC history with activist publications, media reports, and government communication. By the mid-eighties, ministries Rev. William Sloane Coffin of Riverside Church in Manhattan and Detroit's own Bishop Thomas Gumbleton led a choir of anti-war missionaries and clergy who engaged the movement by educating their constituents on Contra brutalities. At the same time, organizations like the Central American Working Group (CAWG) were keeping strict tabs on congressional voting records for use against Reagan's policies, while the Witness for Peace (WFP) partnered with national media outlets to broadcast stories of Contra atrocities in hopes of reaching the public at large. Even the Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto and Ambassador to the U.S. Javier Chamorro enlisted the help of these groups, Peace writes, to achieve solidarity between American and Central American organizers. While there were deficiencies in having no designated spokesman and no standardized communication, the ACWC had a clear message: Stop all funding to Contra rebels.

In chapters seven and eight, Peace writes that the movement experienced a temporary setback with Reagan's landslide victory in 1984, but ACWC continued to carry out national protests, this time with messages more narrowly focused on the brutal tactics of the Contra rebels. The year 1987 was the turning point, Peace claims. As Democrats took both houses of Congress and the Iran-Contra scandal gained attention, funding decreased. The ACWC's credibility soared. The movement's success represented a call to conscience, Peace concludes, that rallied people against actions in Nicaragua.

This work is partially agenda driven, simply meaning Peace's opinions on United States' policy all, but guarantee the direction of his thesis. As expected, the book takes great care in identifying and organizing the disconnected resistance, but takes less care in clarifying the pro-war motivations. To a large extent, Peace uses the movement's commentary to frame the reality rather than allowing a competition of perspectives to do so.

This critique, however, should not detract from the splendid job Peace does with his actual objective in reconstructing the history of this valuable anti-war movement. He shoulders the

burdensome task of collecting information, organizing the participants, and introducing all the organizations as one, cohesive unit. He makes sense of seemingly sporadic, unrelated protests and highlights the movement's influence on U.S. policy. He adds a new sense of the depth and breadth to the ACWC that, at its pinnacle, was able to elevate its cause all the way to the steps of the Capital and successfully garner votes against the funding requests of the Reagan administration. Thanks to Peace's tireless archival research and oral interviews, readers will be exposed, many for the first time, to a powerful anti-war movement that rivaled the Vietnam era.

Peace, Roger. *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. 307 pp.