Peace activists pledge resistance against U.S. military intervention in Central America, 1984-1990

*Time period notes:* It is unclear as to when actions ended, but they seem to have fallen off after aid decreased significantly after October of 1990, due partly to the fact that the Bush administration had decreased its aid to the Contras as a result of negative press and public pressure from grassroots campaigns like the Pledge as well as the Iran-Contra Affair. Some sources also note a shrinking in the scale of tactics either in or after 1987, though this remains unclear.

October 1984 to: October 1990

**Country:** United States

**Location Description:** Actions occurred throughout the United States

**Goals:**
Pledge signers and organizers sought to deter military intervention in Central America, including a full-scale U.S. invasion of Nicaragua.

**Methods**

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 004. Signed public statements
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 004. Signed public statements
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 162. Sit-in
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 178. Guerrilla theatre
Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 004. Signed public statements
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 012. Skywriting and earthwriting
- 034. Vigils
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 037. Singing
- 044. Mock funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 162. Sit-in
- 171. Nonviolent interjection
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 004. Signed public statements
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 162. Sit-in
- 171. Nonviolent interjection
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 004. Signed public statements
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 162. Sit-in
- 171. Nonviolent interjection
• 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Methods in 6th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 004. Signed public statements
• 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 034. Vigils
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 121. Refusal of public support
• 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
• 162. Sit-in

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Human Rights
Peace

Group characterization:

• peace activists
• various religious groups

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Pledge of Resistance (organization), Ken Butigan

Partners:
Sojourners, Witness for Peace, American Friends Service Committee

External allies:
Sanctuary, Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People

Involvement of social elites:
Following veteran Brian Wilson's amputation during a nonviolent obstruction on train tracks, a number of celebrities including Joan Baez and Daniel Ellsberg lent their support to the campaign.

Joining/exiting order of social groups
Groups in 1st Segment:

- Religious social justice groups
- other Central America groups in the Central America peace movement

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Secular social justice groups

Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:

- Celebrities
- anti-South African Apartheid groups

Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

*Segment Length: 1 year*

**Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

*Opponents:*
The Reagan administration

*Nonviolent responses of opponent:*
Not known

*Campaigner violence:*
Not known

*Repressive Violence:*
Arrests

**Success Outcome**

*Success in achieving specific demands/goals:*
6 points out of 6 points

*Survival:*
1 point out of 1 points

*Growth:*
3 points out of 3 points

In the early 1980s, it was no secret that United States president Ronald Reagan would use any means necessary to end or prevent the influence of Communism and the Soviet Union around the globe. The two countries had been engaged in a bitter ideological struggle since the end of World War II, and each sought to expand their influence to other, mostly developing nations. From Central America to Sub-Saharan Africa to the Middle East, the U.S. pursued a foreign policy that made frequent use of military aid—open and clandestine—to countries suspected of either showing or being vulnerable to Soviet influence.

While Reagan was one of the era’s most outspoken and influential anti-Communists, his foreign policy by no means represented an exception to Western, particularly U.S., relations towards the regions like Central America. Like Reagan, multinational corporations operating in Central America (many based in the U.S.) viewed the spread of Communism as a threat to their
interests; low levels of regulation and taxes on business in developing nations friendly to the United States made for a safe business environment for such corporations. Furthermore, U.S. influence, either monetary or physical, had been operating for over a century in the region, well predating the Cold War. In the 1980s, one country—Nicaragua—was feared by peace activists to become the site of the next Cold War battlefield: it began to look more and more like the U.S. would pursue a full-scale invasion to overthrow the country’s leftist Sandinista government, or Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN).

Another concern to peace activists was increasing aid to Contra fighters, an umbrella term for any number of organizations carrying out guerrilla warfare against the FSLN operating in and around Nicaragua; they were notorious for human rights violations and attacks on civilians. In 1980 and ’81, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) attempted to unite the disparate groups so that it could more effectively administer aid. In January of 1982, the Reagan administration secretly granted the CIA $19 million in military aid to recruit and train Contras. This would be one of the first in a series of supports the administration would give to the Contras in exchange for their opposition to the FSLN. Aside from flagrant human rights abuses, Contra activity and U.S. support for it was seen by many activists as a sign of things to come; if they could not curb the FSLN to U.S. and industry’s liking, a U.S. invasion would be all the more likely.

At the 1983 annual meeting of the New Abolitionist Covenant, an amalgamation of Christian peace activists, the group decided to take action against ever-escalating U.S. military involvement in Latin America, a policy which had dramatically increased since the Reagan administration took office in 1981. 7,000 U.S. troops had invaded the island of Grenada in order to overthrow Maurice Bishop’s leftist government. The Covenant’s 53 members feared that this “intervention,” along with the administration’s increasingly hawkish rhetoric, would result in a massive U.S. offensive. In response, Covenant members Jim Wallis and Jim Rice drafted “A Promise of Resistance,” in which they vowed as Christians to physically obstruct any U.S. invasion of the country.

The letter, published in Sojourners magazine (of which Wallis was an editor), also called upon Christians throughout the country, in case of invasion, to nonviolently occupy congressional offices until the Congress moved to end the invasion. The magazine sent a copy of the letter to all Congress-people, the Departments of State and Defense, the CIA, and to President Reagan, and each Covenant member presented it personally to the peace group they worked with at home. After receiving support and input from a number of peace organizations, the Covenant published in Sojourner’s August issue an edited document called the “Pledge of Resistance,” which placed less emphasis on traveling to Nicaragua to nonviolently prevent a U.S. invasion. It also gave readers contact information for seven regional Witness for Peace chapters that volunteered to serve as regional coordinators for the circulation and implementation of the Pledge.

After reading the letter, Berkeley graduate student Ken Butigan, with the support of David Hartsough of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) began again reworking the document to reach a larger, perhaps less faith based community, as well as to refocus efforts on action in the United States. He then gathered the support of groups working on a wide variety of issues, including feminists and anti-nuclear activists, to create a coalition committed to the ideals outlined in the document and to taking action in support of them.

In October of 1984, Butigan and allies rallied for the first public signing of the document in front of the San Francisco Federal Building. The event included 700 people signing the Pledge, with many giving testimonies of their reasoning to the crowd. A number of participants cited religious reasons. Later that month, Sojourners hosted a meeting for peace and justice groups to discuss the Pledge’s implementation. Citing the San Francisco action, Butigan, speaking on behalf of the AFSC and its allies, called for a highly public, organized and decentralized model of organization, as well as an option for Pledge signers to wage legal protest in addition to civil disobedience.

Coming out of this meeting, the number of regional coordinating offices was expanded from 7 to 10, and Butigan published Basta! No Mandate for War, an instructional pamphlet for local Pledge chapters incorporating new ideological and logistical details for the campaign. Local activists began to organize more Pledge groups across the country. They sponsored nonviolent direct action trainings, collected signatures, and organized affinity groups. By the end of 1984, less than 3 months after the San Francisco action, organizers nationwide had collected 42,352 signatures, with half of signers pledging civil disobedience.
College campuses as well as such organizations as the National Lawyers Guild and the Jewish Peace Fellowship continued to publicly endorse the document, and Sojourners sent copies of the collected signatures to the State Department.

The San Francisco Pledge chapter began to enact “peace maneuvers” outside of the city’s Federal Building, a guerrilla theater performance pre-enacting the response of Pledge signers to a possible U.S. invasion in Nicaragua. Pressure mounted on the U.S. government.

The U.S. Congress refused President Reagan’s request for $14 million in aid to right wing Contra fighters, partly because they were known to perform illegal executions (often involving civilians). The Reagan administration then imposed an economic embargo on the Nicaragua.

In retaliation, Pledge groups across the country planned and executed acts of civil disobedience across 80 cities in 16 states, with over 10,000 demonstrators and 2,000 arrestees.

In June of 1985, the Congress approved $27 million in aid to Contra fighters. In response, the national Pledge leadership expanded its focus from direct U.S. intervention to aid to Contra warfare and carried out massive demonstrations in 42 states, with 1,200 arrested for acts of civil disobedience. By September, 80,000 people had signed the Pledge and agreed to resist U.S. funding of extra-judicial killings in all of Central America.

While Pledge leadership had a clearly defined focus on Nicaragua, the Pledge itself provided something of an umbrella for civil disobedience actions by peace groups and individuals concerned with the larger Central American region. Many took up action around El Salvador and Guatemala, two more countries negatively impacted by U.S. aid. For instance, the allied group Witness for Peace acted mostly around Nicaragua, but other allies such as CISPES focused almost exclusively on issues in El Salvador even as Pledge leaders redefined goals in relation to Nicaragua. The wide reach of the Pledge manifested itself not only in issues, but also in tactics, with a number of groups carrying out autonomous actions separate from national leadership. Sources on the Pledge are often unclear as to which actions were which, though all were undertaken in solidarity with and fulfillment of the original Pledge. All furthered the larger goal of a peaceful Central America, and served to fit Nicaragua—the Pledge leaders’ focus—within that narrative.

Throughout 1986 regional chapters led both a massive expansion in Pledge involvement and an escalation of tactics. Activists occupied congressional offices, blocked gates to facilities training Contra fighters and blocked highways and airplane runways, through marches and sit-ins. Pledge signers showed up en mass to candidates’ campaign appearances in order to bring Contra aid to the attention of potential voters. Around Christmastime, activists also flooded shopping malls to drop banners and sing politicized holiday carols.

In February 1987, U.S. National Guard troops were deployed to Honduras, just north of Nicaragua. Pledge activists staged vigils outside of Congressional offices and mass-mailed legislators’ mailboxes with letters of protest. An “April Mobilization” brought together activists fighting both U.S. support for Contra fighters and apartheid South Africa; 567 were arrested at the CIA headquarters in Washington, D.C. Next came a “Summer of Resistance” where protesters blockaded roads and railways to military bases.

The Reagan administration, now restricted by Congress from fully supporting the Contras fighting the Nicaraguan government, found a way to evade Congressional decision – to send aid to the Contras by way of Iran. When Congress found out about this move – probably illegal and unconstitutional – Congress convened lengthy hearings about the matter. A group of peace-minded U.S. Armed Forces veterans held a three-month vigil outside the Congressional hearings.

In August, the same group of military veterans embarked on a forty-day hunger strike where they blockaded train tracks near Concord, California. During the blockade, one veteran, Brian Wilson, was amputated by an oncoming train. Wilson’s injury increased participation in the blockade campaign, drawing the support of Pentagon whistle-blower Daniel Ellsberg and folk singer Joan Baez among other celebrities. On a rotating basis, an energized group of roughly 1,000 protesters in a human blockade succeeded in blocking arms shipments to the Concord base for over two years.
Because the campaigners across the U.S. stepped up their activity in 1987, 1,200 were arrested in acts of civil disobedience.

In February and March of 1988, activists involved in the Pledge’s “Days of Decision” helped to successfully block the passage of two White House proposals for aid to Contra-fighters. The Reagan administration then sent an additional 3200 troops to Honduras. In the following months, because the campaigners saw increasing U.S. military presence in Honduras as a prelude to a Nicaraguan intervention, 900 activists were arrested in 150 cities throughout the country with 30 military bases targeted with nonviolent direct action for their support of ongoing armed conflicts in Central America.

That October 1988, 500 demonstrators took on the Pentagon itself, blocking entrances, occupying the building’s heliport and planting 500 crosses on the lawn to represent those killed by U.S. support for and instigation of the conflicts. The U.S. increased its funding to the military of the right wing government of El Salvador; in response, 1,452 people committed civil disobedience and were arrested in November and December.

President Reagan’s eight-year presidency ended in 1988. Reagan had not succeeded in overthrowing the Nicaraguan government by means of the Contra military action, nor had he launched a direct U.S. invasion. In 1989 the number of active Pledge chapters dwindled. The movement continued, however, because U.S. military support for right-wing governments in other countries in Central America remained active under Reagan’s successor.

Expecting this would be the case, Pledge chapters organized a wave of actions around the January 1989 inauguration of Reagan’s successor and former vice president, George H.W. Bush. The month of May saw banner drops at national monuments in Washington D.C. and cultural attractions in other large cities. Finally, in March of 1990, demonstrators commemorated the tenth anniversary of Oscar Romero’s assassination by U.S.-backed forces with a 15,000 person-strong march on the capital in which 580 protestors were arrested.

While U.S. aid continued to right wing military forces in Central America, the Pledge of Resistance was one of many campaigns in the U.S. Central American peace movement that succeeded in making such support a national issue, and an invasion of Nicaragua, or the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government by Contra forces, a political impossibility for the Reagan and Bush administrations.

**Research Notes**

**Influences:**
Beyond Talk’s Climate Pledge of Resistance, endorsed by such groups as the Rainforest Action Network and Rising Tide North America, draws much of its influence from the original POR campaign. (2)

Another Pledge of Resistance from 2003-2008 used similar tactics to draw attention to the actions of the U.S. government in relation to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. (2)

**Sources:**


**Additional Notes:**
This is one of many instances in which faith-based and secular groups worked together both in planning and implementing actions.

**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**
Kate Aronoff, 02/10/2011

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