

6 Conclusion: The Civic Factor in the Context of U.S. Foreign Policy

In the United States, civic foreign policy toward Central America during the 1970s and 1980s was characterized by a growing civic engagement in the U.S. foreign policy-making process and in inter-American relations. Further, a specific network of interest groups and individuals whose majority was linked to religious communities envisioned a more civic foreign policy. While experiencing human rights violations in Central America and, later, perceiving a policy of the United States that hindered the improvement of human rights and even furthered human suffering in Central America, these groups entered the foreign policy discourse to influence and change U.S. policy. Initially, these religious actors sought to improve the socio-economic and political conditions in a country such as El Salvador. Yet, their main political impact was in the United States.

In order to assist Central American religious groups and NGOs in their effort to fight poverty and to encourage civic participation, U.S. religious groups demanded a U.S. government that was more responsible to the visible suffering and persecution of human beings, to demands of a majority of citizens in the countries of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, and to its own political tradition of freedom, self-determination, and hospitality. One of the main themes of the U.S. religious communities' "foreign policy understanding" implied their competence of representation. They perceived themselves to be eligible to represent the aspirations of "common people." While this theme referred basically to "people abroad," i.e. the majority of Salvadoran citizens, the groups increasingly used the same theme in declarations justifying their activities in the United States and their objectives for U.S. foreign policy.

U.S. Catholic sisters, priests, or Protestant human rights workers employed this argument in various statements. Their criticism pointed toward the official foreign policy's understanding that governments alone should handle state-to-state conduct. In their eyes, the non-democratic representation of a society such as El Salvador in the 1970s and 1980s acquired a look beyond a governmental analysis of the social and political conditions in the respective country. Melinda Roper, the Maryknoll Sisters' President explained her critique of the insufficient societal work of diplomacy:

He [the U.S. Ambassador] lived in Guatemala City and represented the United States Government to the Government of Guatemala. The Guatemalans whom he met and the people with whom he socialized were personally unknown to me. I was up in the mountains working on a diocesan team

whose purpose was to train rural religious leaders, most of whom were subsistence farmers and Indians. Although the Ambassador and I were in Guatemala at the same time, our purpose, experience and understanding of the people and the situation were very different. During the meeting [between her and the Ambassador], it became very obvious to me that our perspectives and purposes clashed and that the communication deteriorated to mutual defensiveness.¹

Father Alfred Winter, who was director of the Cleveland/Ohio mission in El Salvador when two of the mission's churchwomen were murdered in December 1980, lamented a similar "communication gap" with U.S. Secretary of State Edmund Muskie, regarding the interpretation of social and political conditions in El Salvador. In Winter's eyes, Secretary Muskie saw through the eyeglasses of the "big people" whereas Winter and other religious activists argued from the point of view of the "little people," to whom the social and political situation must be related.²

The groups studied in this analysis, believed their foreign policy suggestions to be in the interest of all citizens - abroad and at home -, not necessarily in their self-interest. They tried to make U.S. foreign policy toward Central America more accountable to their demands. And they placed their own demands in the tradition of religious and U.S. concepts of human rights and charity. In 1973, Thomas Quigley, USCC's Latin America adviser, used a phrase by Senator Frank Church to formulate his perception of his country's foreign policy and the duty of the public: "[o]nce a country's foreign policy becomes unhinged from its values, it cannot long expect to sustain public support."³

As faith-based groups, the involved NGOs used their belief system as a moral persuasion for political ends. As U.S. groups, they also used a specific U.S. value system for the same political ends. These political ends touched the civic sphere. Whether Maryknoll, the Sanctuary groups, the Catholic bishops, the human rights office of the NCC, individual missionaries and religious workers abroad, they represented associations of citizens that stepped into the public sphere and worked "to further its concept of the public interest."⁴ They formulated foreign policy goals that derived from a

¹ "Today's Peacemaker," speech at the University of Notre Dame, 5 October 1981, in: MSA, Melinda Roper Talks, Box: S 1.5, Folder 3: July-December 1981.

² See *The Situation in El Salvador*, U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, 97th Cong., 1st. sess., 18 March and 9 April 1981, 191, 209. Secretary Muskie responded to Father Winter's reproach: "You do not understand my concept of foreign policy. Decision of State and foreign policy should be the property of the people of the United States." See *ibid.*, 191, 209.

³ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements, *International Protection of Human Rights: The Work of International Organizations and the Role of U.S. Foreign Policy*, 93rd Cong., 1st sess., 1 August, 13, 19, 20, 27 September 1973, 3, 4, 10, 11, 16, 18, 24, 25 October, 1 November, 7 December 1973, 210.

⁴ *The Dorsey Dictionary of American Government and Politics* (Chicago: Dorsey, 1988). See also chapter 1.

positive rights tradition. Envisioning a community of common values, they wanted to base U.S. foreign policy on social justice and civil and political human rights. They also demanded the protection of individual citizens in concrete cases and argued against abuses by the state, in Central America as well as in the United States.

In an attempt to be more influential on the political discourse, new organizations, advocacy groups, grassroots groups, and special campaigns were built and organized from the 1960s to the 1980s. They provided forums of exchange. The most vocal criticism of U.S. policy toward Central America and Central American civil war refugees came from these new participants of the foreign policy-making process. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, more faith-based interest groups focusing on Central American issues emerged and diversified the discussion in their respective community and in the United States. One does not have to agree with these groups' goals and interests and their aspiration of being a voice of the common people. Still, one can conclude that they diversified and democratized the U.S. foreign policy-making process.

Civic Foreign Policy Toward Central America

Central America became the focus of U.S. religious groups' foreign policy concern in the 1980s. Civic foreign policy toward Central America during the 1970s and 1980s has many origins. Foremost, it is embedded in the complex political, social, and religious relationship between the United States and the countries south of the Rio Grande. The former director of Witness for Peace, Mike Clark, stated in an interview in 1992:

[U.S. missionaries'] work helped prepare the ground over several decades. When things began to happen there in the 1970s and 80s, they became an important resource, particularly for the religious community. I doubt you could find a missionary today who knows very much about Bosnia-Herzegovina. But right now I could call one hundred people I know who had once served in Guatemala.⁵

The heated debate in the United States in the 1980s was also the result of President Carter's human rights and President Reagan's revitalized Cold War rhetoric and policy. However, only the missionary connection and experiences made in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s explain the religious communities' heightened awareness and quick responses to U.S. Cold War policies in Central America and its more quiet interest in other regions of conflict.

⁵ Quoted in Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 143.

Early missionary work was closely related to the economic growth and expansion of the United States. Almost accordingly, the changing face of missionary work was interconnected with the growth of U.S. power and its abuses during the Cold War. The roles of Christian individuals and groups in various "emancipation" struggles in Third World countries or in Eastern Europe as well as in the civil rights movement in the United States influenced the re-formulation of Christian theological positions on human rights.⁶ In the case of U.S. groups and Central America, we could observe a blending of these movements. Fundamental Christian principals such as human solidarity and the dignity of the human person were re-interpreted by those who saw a growing discrepancy between belief (that all are made in the image of God) and reality (poverty, human rights violations, or U.S. supremacy). A growing group of U.S. Catholic missionaries, former U.S. Protestant missionaries, and members of the Latin America and human rights offices of church agencies in the United States promoted issues of social justice, and with the ascendance of concrete human rights violations in Chile, Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, or Nicaragua, issues of human rights in the United States.

Accordingly, when the U.S. bishops issued their statement on behalf of Central America in November 1981, they did not only speak out because Central America had become the center stage of U.S. foreign policy concerns "but also because of the strong and growing relationship between the Church in the United States and the Church in all of Latin America."⁷ The bishops' message was the "fruit of years of interrelationship between North and South American Catholics."⁸ Beyond the institutional affiliation and interaction of the two Catholic Churches, a whole network of religious activists of different Christian faiths working across the American continent had developed throughout the 1970s. Transnational societal and personal relations had deepened and provided for the necessary commitment to engage.

Civic foreign policy toward Central America expanded in the United States due to a number of different reasons. The history of the missionary and religious human rights network provided the fertile ground. According to one scholar, the "'moral perfectionism' rooted in Protestant culture" served as a common ground for progressive international activism of U.S. religious groups such as "clear-eyed support for

⁶ Tracy, "Religion," 247-252. See also Moltmann, "Christlicher Glaube," 18ff. This is not only true for the ecumenical movement within mainline Protestantism represented by the World Council of Churches but also for Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Evangelicals.

⁷ McGlone, *Sharing Faith*, 165.

⁸ *Ibid.*

revolutionary change ...[or] the Social Gospel."⁹ Faith-based Central America activism is embedded in this tradition of moral perfectionism of the liberal wing of U.S. Protestantism. It also echoed the social justice tradition of the Catholic Church. However, concrete suffering and persecution of individual clergy members, missionaries, as well as peasants, and other newly active members of Central American societies activated the religious groups' open participation in secular politics. In the case of El Salvador, the fraudulent presidential elections and the persecution of Jesuits and other progressive members of the Catholic Church in 1977 triggered lobbying activities in the United States. On a sincere but still quiet level, U.S. religious groups critically followed the events in El Salvador between 1977 and 1979. They began to publish full-scale analyses of the false distribution of U.S. economic assistance and of the persistent patterns of repression and social injustice, and to organize tours for politicians and members of the church community. Still, the killings of concrete human beings and friends like Archbishop Romero, the four U.S. churchwomen, and missionaries' neighbors and acquaintances in 1980 shook an already sensitive community.

President Reagan's revitalized Cold War policy violated the belief system of many activists who believed poverty and non-egalitarian political structures to be the main cause for dissatisfaction and conflict. The growing involvement of the United States in the Salvadoran, and later Nicaraguan affairs, under President Reagan triggered even more passionate responses in the United States. Additional groups entered the Central America-related debate because of the Central American refugee problem. Traditional refugee organizations were concerned about the situation of Salvadoran refugees because of the increasing migration problems caused by the civil war and due to their traditional role as relief and resettlement agencies in U.S. refugee policy at home and abroad. Grassroots groups and activists of the Sanctuary movement were drawn into the issue because of the arrival of migrants at the U.S. border or due to previous peace- or Central America related activism.

Political Impact

The network of faith-based groups and individuals formulated foreign policy contents aimed at "improving" U.S. policy toward Central America for the benefit of the citizens in both regions. One major belief of civic foreign policy was the conviction that

⁹ Gosse, *Where the Boys Are*, 9.

the groups could help Central America by changing and influencing U.S. policies and practice. According to the groups, improving U.S. policy meant grounding U.S. policy on human rights, refraining from a military solution, trying to save lives, opting for negotiation, and offering asylum as a duty of the United States.

They formulated short-term and long-term goals. In both cases, they framed issues of relevance to the conflict abroad in order to make them comprehensible, to attract attention, and to encourage action.¹⁰ In regards to El Salvador, questions of social justice and human rights such as the right to associate, to free opinion, and the right to the integrity of the person were the center of the debate in the 1970s. In the 1980s, military aid – once perceived as a means rather than a goal – became the rallying point. After the outbreak of the civil war in El Salvador, goals became less absolute. By calling for an end of U.S. military aid, the road to peaceful solution of the conflict seemed more feasible to these actors.

Foreign policy, refugee policy, and human rights policy is made by governments. The framework of civic foreign policy does not dispute this truth. Yet, the history of civic foreign policy toward Central America shows in how far societal actors shaped inter-American relations on the nongovernmental level. It also explains to what extent NGOs mobilized around moral issues, tried to influence the discourse and the foreign policy process of the United States.

No history of interest group activism would be complete without investigating the success of the interest. Analyses of interest groups politics have methodological problems with demonstrating causality between the interest and activism of a particular group and the actual policy outcome. Religious groups sought to influence state policy and practice. As we could see throughout the chapters, the religious human and refugee rights groups could not end state repression in El Salvador, the suffering of a vast number of people, or U.S. military aid to the country. Still, they had an effect on certain governmental initiatives and legislation.

The concrete, short-term goals tended to be more effective and successful than long-term ideas for the formulation of U.S. foreign policy. When the issues moved into the higher level of politics, issue-related interests such as human rights, especially religious persecution in El Salvador in the 1970s or refugee questions at particular times in the 1980s had more chances to be heard. When issues became less important in daily affairs, it was more difficult to find entrance and an agenda.

The history of faith-based Central America concern demonstrates a two-dimensional influence on politics and society. Apart from lobbying governmental institutions, religious groups reached into the U.S. and Central American societies. Short-term means and goals such as the foundation of new groups and campaigns, the distribution of information, the publication of information and background analyses, the release of an individual political prisoner, the successful struggle against death threats, or the financial and humanitarian assistance of refugees, need to be taken into account in order to draw conclusions about the effectiveness and success of civic foreign policy toward Central America.

Concrete cases of violence or migration were more effective in engaging more U.S. religious groups and citizens than any other mobilizing effort. In the 1970s and 1980s, traditional church groups changed their international outlook on questions of human rights, refugee issues, and entered a new dialogue with Central American NGOs, church groups, and individuals. But only the deaths and persecution of U.S. citizens, religious co-workers, neighbors, or the arrival of individual refugees had the effect of turning theoretical and moral persuasion into practical action.

In terms of the implementation of moral standards, the field of refugee assistance was one of the most effective U.S. religious citizens' actions in the 1980s. Abroad and at home, U.S. groups helped their Salvadoran counterparts to provide "vulnerable populations with sources of protection alternative to those of the state itself."¹¹ Furthermore, the refugee question helped to distribute information about the general conflict in El Salvador and its underlying causes.

While Latin American countries, and especially Central American countries were usually the targets of the human rights debates in the 1970s and 1980s, much of the debate shifted to the United States in the 1980s. Increasingly, the issues touched the very essence of U.S. policies, U.S. power, democracy, and the protection of human rights in the United States. Adopting Keck and Sikkink's boomerang metaphor, we can argue that the "boomerang" of sharing information and trying to influence decision-making transnationally, flew back to the United States. Interaction initiated more participation of U.S. citizens, i.e. more civic foreign policy. As a consequence, notions of civic foreign policy that already existed in U.S. society broadened.

¹⁰ Regarding the framing of issues as an NGO strategy, see Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, 2.

¹¹ Burgerman, "Mobilizing Principles," 906.

The activities by faith-based groups against state power, for more power at the hands of citizens, and for decentralizing political and legal structures started in El Salvador. However, the U.S. involvement in the civil war and the refugee issue brought these issues to the United States. For U.S. religious groups and citizens, the experiences abroad or with refugees in the United States triggered the inspection of state power and foreign policy and the quest for integrating moral values into U.S. foreign policy. These citizens searched "for greater international balance between state and civil society."¹² Whether the Sanctuary movement or the Maryknollers, WOLA or the groups of the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, the Catholic bishops or the Religious Task Force on Central America, all of these faith-based groups demanded less arbitrary state power. They criticized the Salvadoran government's human rights record but as U.S. citizens, they felt compelled to speak out against their own government's record.

They achieved only partial success in changing their government's Central America policy. Yet, wanting to integrate fundamental Christian and U.S. ideals as a source and goal in U.S. foreign and refugee policy, they became missionaries of democracy and human rights in their own country. Encouraged by their Central American colleagues and the struggle for democracy and social justice as well as influenced by domestic disputes of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, the new foreign policy actors in the United States occupied an important role in addressing the civic deficits of foreign policy means and foreign policy values in the United States.

The broadening of civic foreign policy toward Central America in terms of numbers, i.e. more participants, shows its constraints. The autonomy of civic foreign policy is relative. Goals were only successful when formulated within the canon of U.S. values and traditions. Civic participation broadened when issues were concrete and the U.S. government seemed to have violated the belief systems of its citizens.

The majority of religious groups and citizens engaged in Central America activism used "constructive" methods. They worked with the U.S. Congress, organized demonstrations, fact-finding missions for members of Congress and citizens, sister-city partnerships, and helped in refugee camps. Even the Sanctuary movement, which disobeyed U.S. law, followed a positive outlook in the form of concrete charity. Some of the groups adhered to a similar Cold War belief like the Reagan administration, albeit from the opposite end. Believing foreign actors, in their case the United States, to be the

¹² Richard Falk, "Accountability, Asylum, and Sanctuary: Challenging Our Political and Legal Imagination," in Nanda, *Refugee Law and Policy*, 23-32, 30.

principal cause of the social and political problems in Central America, they applied simple Cold War categories to a complex situation. Yet, these groups were a minority in the broad coalition of religious groups. Criticism of U.S. policy was ubiquitous but for most activists and groups not an end in itself. The goal was a responsible U.S. government that cherished individuals' lives and broadened the economic and political possibilities of citizens worldwide. The U.S. missionary impulse had come home.

Beyond the 1980s

Since the end of the Cold War, civic foreign policy toward Central America has not been very vocal. The end of the Cold War facilitated the peace processes in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. The political conditions have improved to some extent. Poverty, human rights violations, and undemocratic structures, however, remain. Yet, Central American issues have vanished from the daily interest of U.S. policymakers and the public. Religious groups started to concentrate on other international issues. Most of the grassroots campaigns and groups disappeared with the decline of the issue.¹³ However, national advocacy groups such as WOLA, the Religious Task Force on Central America, Witness for Peace, EPICA, or the Central America Working Group of the Coalition of a New Foreign and Military Policy are still in existence and continue to rally around Latin American issues such as the "drug war" or the question of indigenous rights.¹⁴ The human rights offices of the USCC and the NCC have been renamed, but continue to address issues of human rights in the Americas, tying them to current global agendas, such as debt relief.

Versions of the civic vision of U.S. foreign policy toward Central America can be found in pleas of the groups in the 1990s. Since 1994, a growing number of citizens and faith-based groups have been following the initiative of Maryknoll priest Roy Bourgeois and other religious activists who annually demonstrate for the closing of the U.S. Army School of the Americas.¹⁵ Many of the Latin American dictators and military officers responsible for human rights violations in the 1970s and 1980s graduated from the institution. The record of Salvadoran graduates with a grave record of human rights

¹³ Some refocused their agenda and started to address U.S. policy in the Second Gulf War or poverty in the United States.

¹⁴ The RTFCA was renamed. Today, it is called Religious Task Force on Central America and Mexico. The Central America Working Group is now the Latin America Work Group.

violations is especially high. A majority of the officers held responsible for the assassination of Archbishop Romero, the murder of the four U.S. churchwomen in 1980, the massacre at El Mozote, and the killings of the six Jesuits in 1989 graduated from the school.¹⁶

The U.S. Catholic bishops' annual pronouncement on public policy issues from 1999, under the title "Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium," reflect very well the goals of civic foreign policy during the 1970s and 1980s. The bishops urge "all citizens to...stay involved in public life, seeking the common good and renewing our democracy."¹⁷ The bishops call the "building of peace, combating poverty and despair, and protecting freedom and human rights" the "moral imperatives" "for any world leader."¹⁸ The U.S. missionaries, priests, nuns, church workers, faith-based grassroots activists, and advocacy leaders involved in human rights, social justice, and refugee projects in the 1970s and 1980s thought it was their civic responsibility to lead U.S. foreign policy toward these goals. As citizens, they took their vision of a democratically responsible foreign policy into the public square. Such initiatives from the society seem vital for democratic policymaking in an increasingly interdependent world.

¹⁵ The School was located in Panama from 1946 until 1984 when it reopened its doors in Fort Benning, Georgia. According to the Panama Canal Treaty, the school had to close its operations in Panama.

¹⁶ A case for the closing of the school due to its human rights record is made in: Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *School of Assassins: The Case for Closing the School of the Americas and for Fundamentally Changing U.S. Foreign Policy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997).

¹⁷ <http://www.nccbuscc.org/faithfulcitizenship/citizenship.htm> (April 2000).

¹⁸ Ibid.