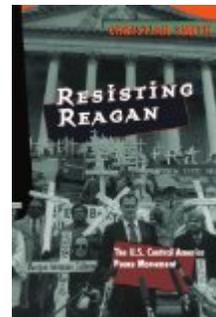


**Christian Smith.** *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement.*  
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. xx + 464 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN  
978-0-226-76335-4.



**Reviewed by** Michael L. Krenn

**Published on** H-LatAm (September, 1997)

Christian Smith, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, has written a marvelous book which reminds us of several things which make for delicious food for thought: that not everyone in the United States found the "Great Communicator"--Ronald Reagan--positively irresistible when he turned on the photogenic charm and rolled out the well-rehearsed platitudes; that this "Teflon President" managed (or mismanaged, as the case may be) some situations so unadroitly that the biggest public relations spatula in the world could not disengage him from some very messy spots; that Americans *can* become morally outraged at their own government *and* do something about it; that U.S. foreign policy can be made a topic for open and public debate and discussion; and, as one previous reviewer has already noted, that demands for reform which spring from religious groups are not monopolized by the religious right. Smith accomplishes all of this, and more, through his well written and argued account of the movement which arose in the United States during the 1980s

in protest against the Reagan Administration's policies in Central America.

The book focuses on the efforts of three protest organizations--the Pledge of Resistance, Sanctuary, and Witness for Peace--to bring a halt to what they perceived as the inhumane and costly U.S. policy toward Central America during the 1980s. It begins by offering brief background chapters dealing with Central American history and the history of U.S. intervention and interference in Central America prior to the 1980s. This is followed with a somewhat more detailed description of the Reagan Administration's embrace of the theory of "low intensity conflict" and its application of that theory to the problems it faced in Central America. (One might note the similarities between low intensity conflict theory and the doctrines of counter-insurgency which, supposedly, had been discredited by the Vietnam War. As historians well know, however, one of the U.S. government's reactions to failed policies is to simply rename and repackage the same idea.)

With these introductory chapters out of way, Smith moves into the meat of his study: analyzing

how and why movements opposed to the Reagan policy in Central America arose; why they were able to sustain themselves; and what impact they had on U.S. policies toward Central America. Briefly stated, Smith believes that "moral outrage" was the key element in goading individual activists and organizations into action. Some of the best sections of the book describe the epiphany undergone by individuals as they came face to face with terrified refugees from El Salvador or, while visiting Nicaragua, saw the destruction wrecked by U.S.-supported Contras. And that same moral indignation, which very often had a strongly religious base, was reflected in the organizations they helped establish: Witness for Peace, whose members offered themselves as "human shields" between the Nicaraguan peasantry and the marauding Contras; Sanctuary, which acted as a virtual Underground Railroad for Central American refugees who came to the United States; and Pledge of Resistance, which pledged to engage in acts of resistance should the United States invade Central America.

How did these organizations, which started out as small and somewhat inchoate groups, manage not only to survive but grow in the face of intense hostility from the Reagan Administration? According to Smith, Reagan and his advisors were themselves responsible for much of the protest movement's vitality. By making the Central American situation a public relations campaign, Reagan's people kept it constantly on the minds of the American people. This, of course, is what they had intended, but the results were not. By raising the issue to white-hot intensity, Reagan suffered a backlash: people began to fear that his Cold Warrior rhetoric might involve the United States in war, and the memories of the debacle in Vietnam haunted the American public. In addition, Reagan had to cope with a Congress which often took an adversarial position, especially when it sniffed public dissatisfaction on this particular issue. Finally, the Reagan Administration simply dropped the ball too many times: its miserable attempts to

keep the Contra war under the cover of secrecy; the embarrassing publication of the CIA's "murder manual"; and the exposure of Ollie North's activities during the Iran-Contra scandal were just some of the administration's fumbles. Yet, Smith also notes that the organizations themselves were responsible for much of their success. They were well organized, were aided by hundreds of smaller "feeder" and "carrier" movements, and were adept at using the public forum to carry their message to the American people.

That last point may be somewhat surprising, since, as Smith notes, "The Reagan White House was indisputably the most media-savvy U.S. presidential administration ever hold office" (p. 249). Reagan and his cohorts were quite able to "frame" the Central American situation in a way that served their purposes, and they had the influence and power to get that message to the American people. In addition, the White House was able to use its immense power to constantly harass and impede the protest movement through a variety of legal and extra-legal means (wiretaps, arrests of movement leaders on spurious charges, anti-movement propaganda campaigns, and so forth). To counter all of this, the movement had to use its own limited resources to their fullest extent. Providing the American people with "dramatic" examples of the problems in Central America was one way. Nothing worked better than, for example, having Witness for Peace activists putting their lives on the line in Nicaragua. The movement also worked to develop close and personal ties with members of the media and, instead of trying to consistently break into the national newscasts, concentrated on local activities which would attract the local media. These factors, combined with the fact that the movement could nearly always point to the contradictions and problems with what the Reagan Administration *said* it was doing and what it *was* doing in Central America, made the movement a formidable opponent, even for the telegenic Reagan.

Smith does not sugar-coat this portrait of the protest movement. It was always riven with internal squabbles about tactics and goals. The religious overtones of much of the movement turned off some potential supporters. And, finally, some of the activists were simply asses and boors when it came right down to it. The movement had a rather short shelf-life. By the time Bill Clinton came into office it had virtually disappeared. As Smith concludes, this was due to "a combination of success, failure, and irrelevance" (p. 360). The movement had, after all, been successful in blunting the most extreme measures of the Reagan Administration in Central America. On the other hand, one of the focal points for the movement had been the Sandinista government, and it had been voted from office. Finally, by the time Clinton stepped into the White House, the Central American situation had lost the attention of the American public. Other issues dominated their thinking.

The book is not without problems. Certainly, historians will have some questions about the first introductory chapters dealing with Central American history, the history of U.S. intervention in the region, and the development of low intensity conflict theory and its application in Central America. These chapters are based entirely on secondary sources and, by their very nature, are sketchy. The sources consulted are almost uniformly those most critical of U.S. policy in Central America. Nevertheless, for the History professor interested in using the text in the classroom, these shortcomings could easily be solved by also assigning one of several good studies of U.S.-Central American relations (Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, or Thomas Leonard, *Central America and the United States*, for example). The reliance on secondary sources, newspapers and magazines, and interviews for most of the book may also be cause for some concern. Without access to most government documents dealing with this particular issue and time period, Smith is left to rely on the works of others in piecing together

such things as the response of the Reagan Administration to the protest movement. Here again, however, the problem seems relatively minor. After all, Smith's focus is on the development of the *protest movement* and he clearly does not intend his book to be an in-depth study of either U.S. policies toward or actions in Central America during the Reagan years.

As a scholar of U.S. diplomatic history, I found the book to be useful on several levels. First and foremost, it makes an extremely important contribution to the debate over the impact of public opinion on U.S. foreign policy decisions. With his careful analysis of the Central America peace movement, Smith, it seems to me, neither overnor underestimates the significance of public opinion in terms of the Reagan Administration's policies in Central America. He emphasizes the special political and social realities that came together in the 1980s and allowed the movement to have a substantial, though not decisive, influence on this particular foreign policy issue, while nevertheless arguing that such conditions could come together in the debate over some future episode in U.S. diplomacy. Second, the book accentuates the need for an open and public discourse on U.S. foreign policy. By accentuating the extremely *human* dimension of the policy decisions reached behind closed doors in Washington, Smith brings home to the reader the decided need--despite the cries of the "realists"--for at least some note of moral integrity in U.S. diplomacy. Finally (and I fully admit taking a deep personal delight in this), he thoroughly exposes the fraudulent and hollow nature of the Reagan foreign policy: a policy based on fear and the concomitant of fear, which is a reliance on the brute force of the bully. Little wonder that Smith emphasizes the moral outrage of the protesters.

Copyright (c)1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit, educational use if proper credit is given to the au-

thor and to the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

**Citation:** Michael L. Krenn. Review of Smith, Christian. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S Central America Peace Movement*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1289>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.