Grassroots Movements and Witnesses for Peace: Challenging U.S. Policies in Latin America in the Post-Cold War Era

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This article examines the U.S.-Latin American peace movement from the end of the Cold War until the present, and attempts to explain the regeneration of an earlier movement which had peaked in the decade of the 1980s. Most scholars believed that the Central American peace movement ended by the early 1990s, but Virginia Williams argues that new phenomena revived the existing peace organizations of the 1980s and gave life to new ones. This article focuses on a few specific peace organizations—Witness for Peace, School of the Americas Watch, and the Committe for the Rescue and Defense of Vieques, but seeks to explain the larger movement for peace and justice in the Americas.

During the 1970s and 1980s human rights groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) proliferated both in the United States and Latin America due to the rise of violence stemming from the civil wars in Central America and from the rise of oppressive military dictatorships, many of which were supported by the U.S. government. Citizens in the United States became involved with human rights issues and groups in Latin America because of the large numbers of church workers (priests, missionaries, and lay workers), Peace Corps volunteers, and other humanitarian groups whose members lived and worked there in the 1960s and 1970s. The Jimmy Carter administration's emphasis on human rights suggested that peace groups and organizations had an ally in the federal government, and the Latin American Bishop's conference in Medallin, Colombia (1968), gave church support to work with the poor in Latin America. Between 1983 and 1990 the number of NGOs doubled in the United States, while in Latin America the number almost tripled between 1981 and 1990.[1] The reinvigorated hostilities between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. beginning in 1979 turned the world's attention to Central America, and the civil wars in El Salvador (1980–1992) and

PEACE & CHANGE, Vol. 29, No. 3&4, July 2004
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Nicaragua (1979–1990) became hot spots of the Cold War and U.S. foreign policy.

The Latin American solidarity movement grew in the United States as peace and human rights activists and organizations focused their energy on stopping the Contra war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and ending U.S. support for the military government of El Salvador and the military training of Salvadoran soldiers. Scholars of the Central American peace movement suggested that it thrived during the decade of the 1980s because of Ronald Reagan's renewal of the Cold War and his focusing of it against the Central American people.[2] Scholars also uniformly refer to the demise of the movement after 1991, when the open hostilities in the region ceased, followed by the so-called period of "redemocratization" of Central America in the early 1990s. Subsequently, socialism and democratic socialist experiments found themselves discredited worldwide, and the new governments of Latin America dispersed the liberal clergy and lay workers for supporting leftist governments and revolution.

During the early 1990s the U.S.–Latin American peace movement waned without a Cold War raison d'etre, while the American people celebrated the "end of communism," and at least some liberal activists held out hope for a new pluralistic world order. After all, Contra aid was no longer an issue, and there was some peace in the war-ravaged nations of Central America. But the poor people of Latin America grew ever more marginalized, and although more people were voting during the early 1990s, their elected government officials embraced neoliberal economic models that undermined democracy and deepened historic patterns of dependency, which resulted in a shift of decision-making power to globalized capital. Most of the "liberated" Latin American people experienced their political and civil rights as shaky, while their standards of living continued to decline.

Although the peace movement languished somewhat between 1989 and 1991, new phenomena soon revived the existing peace organizations of the 1980s and gave life to new ones.[3] During the early 1990s the U.S. government encouraged the Latin American nations to privatize every sector of their economies and to take their place within the new world order. But that new world order relegated Latin American nations to the periphery, and by the mid-1990s many Latin American people began to protest against the economic policies that limited economic development and their leaders who sanctioned them. By mid-2003 four Latin American presidents (from Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru) had been driven

from office due to popular protest movements and public outrage over U.S.-backed free-market economic policies. Even the United States—where the idea of popular protest almost had been relegated to historical memory—has witnessed the resurgence of popular protests targeted at the capitalist giants of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO).[4]

Witness for Peace (WFP) became one of the strongest organizations in the United States that focused its energy on changing U.S. policies in Latin America. Witness for Peace played a major role in lobbying Congress to stop Contra aid to Nicaragua in the 1980s and kept U.S. citizens informed about the U.S. government-supported violence in that nation. WFP was organized in 1983 by a small band of dedicated "church people" who had first-hand experience with Latin America, along with some intellectuals who understood the patterns of U.S.–Latin American relations. Their purpose was mainly to stop U.S. Contra aid in Nicaragua, and their mission was "to develop an ever-broadening, prayerful, biblically-based community of United States citizens who stand with the Nicaraguan people by acting in continuous nonviolent resistance to U.S. covert or other intervention in their country. To mobilize public opinion and help change U.S. foreign policy to one which fosters justice, peace, and friendship. To welcome others in this endeavor who may vary in spiritual approach but are with us in purpose."[5]

Witness for Peace became a national organization that organized mostly church people but welcomed others who committed themselves to live among the Nicaraguans who lived with the incessant violence committed by the U.S.-sponsored Contras during the 1980s. The organization succeeded in promoting public awareness about the Contra atrocities and the extent to which civilians in Nicaragua suffered from the presence of the "counter-terrorists." The organization undertook a two-pronged approach to its campaign to stop U.S. involvement in the Contra War, by enlisting long-term volunteers to live in Nicaragua, who with their presence, their cameras, and their letters home could deter Contra attacks in Nicaragua. To educate more people who could return home and speak in their communities, could lobby Congress, and could keep the issue alive in the United States, WFP created short-term delegations made up of professionals, school teachers, academics, and most of all, church congregation members to visit Nicaragua for two weeks. Although Witness for Peace members disagreed at times about their role in American politics, they held together a viable organization bent on stopping a violent war.[6]

In 1989, as the wars in Central America were winding down, the organization changed its mission statement from "biblically based to faith based to spiritually based," and finally after 1990 (the end of the Contra War), Witness for Peace broadened its focus to include the IMF, the World Bank, and economic violence.[7] But the early 1990s presented difficult struggles for Witness for Peace as well as the other peace organizations in Latin America and the United States. The "struggle," after all, was "over," and the bipolar world was supposed to have given way to a more balanced, pluralistic world order. That never materialized, and instead, U.S. policy in Latin America turned to "shaping the strategic environment to prevent conflict and promote regional stability."[8]

Consistent with U.S. policy in the region since the turn of the twentieth century, the U.S. government continued to interpret "instability as any challenge to U.S. leadership."[9] Peace activists in the United States experienced difficulties maintaining their organizations and educating the American populace about the importance of continuing a struggle against a faceless enemy, and in the meantime popular and socialist movements found themselves discredited throughout the world. In early 1991 the board of directors of Witness for Peace called on the organization to address these concerns by dealing with the changed reality of the world between 1983 and 1991, by searching for a new grounding orientation, by struggling for a commonality of purpose, and by figuring out how to make the case compelling enough to get support from the American people.[10] What had been one of the most effective organizations in bringing public attention to the U.S. role in the Central American wars of the 1980s was struggling to survive financially in the early 1990s, was unsure of its purpose, and was losing support from many of its once-committed members.[11]

By 1994, however, incidents in Haiti and the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico helped Witness for Peace redefine its goals and strengthen the commitment of its members, as well as bring new activists into the fold. On New Year's Day, 1994, the Chiapas uprising in Mexico [which began in opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and other government policies that harmed the indigenous people] unleashed one of the most sophisticated peasant revolts in the Western Hemisphere.[12] The Zapatista (Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or EZLN) rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico, shocked the world because of its explicit resistance to neoliberalism and to globalization, coinciding with the passage of NAFTA, which went into effect the same day. Unique among peasant uprisings, the modern Zapatistas represented

the "fusion of a classic peasant movement with indigenous peoples' struggles."[13] The Zapatistas broke from traditional models of guerrilla insurgency by rejecting the idea of leadership by a charismatic caudillo, and although the EZLN championed socialism, it refrained from using Marxist–Leninist rhetoric. And drawing from recent revolutionary movements in Central America, the EZLN refrained from laying claim to state power for itself and opted instead to recognize the Mexican Constitution. The Zapatistas called on Mexican workers, the poor, and the labor movement to rise up against neoliberal economics and the violence of poverty, providing the blueprint for a broader Latin American peace movement, while sending a foreboding message to the power structures in Mexico City and Washington, D.C.[14]

The ousting of democratically elected Jean Bertrand Aristide of Haiti in 1991 and his subsequent return in 1994 led to a WFP presence in that nation. By the end of 1994 Witness for Peace had sent delegations to Chiapas, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Colombia, and Haiti. More important, WFP had revamped its goals to include "resistance to policies—especially of our own government—which contribute to poverty and oppression; educating ourselves and other U.S. citizens about the human costs of the debt crisis, and reform of/and citizen participation in lending policies in Latin America, and debt relief for Latin America and the Caribbean."[15] By 1996 Witness for Peace had changed its statement to read, "Witness for Peace is a politically independent, grassroots organization. We are people committed to nonviolence and led by faith and conscience. Our mission is to support peace, justice and sustainable economies in the Americas by changing U.S. policies and corporate practices which contribute to poverty and oppression in Latin America and the Caribbean. We stand with people who seek justice."[16] When Witness for Peace broadened its focus from the Contra war in Nicaragua to include the IMF, the World Bank, and economic violence, long-term WFP volunteer Greg Hessel summed up his view of the problem with U.S. foreign policy: "The problem is not how we think about Nicaragua; the problem is how we think."[17] By 2003 Witness for Peace issues included U.S. military policy, unfair trade agreements, sweatshops and labor rights, corporate responsibility, environmental justice, debt relief for impoverished nations, the Cuban embargo, reform of international financial institutions, and closing the U.S. Army School of the Americas.[18]

With the Cold War pronounced "over," scholars both at home and abroad were declaring an "end to history," and the people at home in the United States celebrated the victory against the communist

enemy. At the end of the Cold War U.S. policy in Latin America turned to "shaping the strategic environment to prevent conflict and promote stability."[19] But by the end of the twentieth century, U.S. leadership became synonymous with global market capitalism, and the U.S. government began forcing Latin American nations to jump on board the neoliberal economic road or face reprisals. In 2002 President George W. Bush summarized his administration's position on the economic globalization of the Western Hemisphere in a speech to the Organization of American States: "We are committed to building a prosperous, free, and democratic hemisphere. Nothing will distract us, and nothing will deter us in completing this great work. The future of this hemisphere depends on the strength of three commitments—democracy, security, and free-market development."[20] Bush further stated, "Argentina and nations throughout our hemisphere need to strengthen our commitment to market-based reform, not weaken it."[21] This statement particularly was telling given the fact that Argentina, which had followed the neoliberal recipe to the letter in the 1980s and 1990s and had become a showcase of free-market "reforms," was in the midst of its most difficult economic crisis ever. By 2002 the government was bankrupt, and the nation's population had given up on its leaders who had instituted the neoliberal economic reforms dictated by Washington, D.C., through the IMF.[22]

In the 1990s one of the strongest elements of U.S. Cold War policies remained: the U.S. military presence and military training in Latin America. In 1990 Father Roy Bourgeois, a Maryknoll priest turned political activist (because of his work in Bolivia during the Hugo Bonzer Suarez military government of the 1970s), together with a small group of concerned activists, formed the organization School of the Americas Watch (SOA Watch). Their action was a direct response to the murder of six Jesuit priests and their two coworkers by School of the Americas graduates in El Salvador in November 1989.[23] In November 1990, around the anniversary of the massacre, Bourgeois and nine others gathered for a thirty-five-day fast at the gates of SOA at Fort Benning, in Columbus, Georgia. Bourgeois went to prison for fourteen months for trespassing on federal property and for splattering his own blood on the SOA "wall of fame," which honored the Bolivian dictator, who threw him out of Bolivia, among other notorious dictators such as General Hector Gramajo (Defense minister of Guatemala from 1987–1990, best known for genocide and scorched earth campaigns in which tens of thousands of peasants were killed) and Roberto D'Aubuisson (El Salvador's death-squad

leader from 1978–1992, best known for ordering the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero). The School of the Americas archives contained all the information necessary to link the graduates of the school with other infamous atrocities such as the massacre of the village of El Mozote, El Salvador, where all but one of the 900 villagers were killed by military forces; the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador (the day after he asked the military to lay down its arms and stop killing its own people) in 1980; and the murder of four American church women who were assassinated in El Salvador that same year.

After leaving federal prison, Bourgeois took his findings (in the form of a Truth Commission on El Salvador) to peace groups and churches throughout the United States. Amnesty International published the findings of the Truth Commission in its newsletter, and subsequently *Newsweek* published a two-page article that brought national attention to the atrocities linked to the SOA and to the U.S. government. By 1993 the SOA Watch movement was under way with thousands of church activists joined by a cadre of college student activists accusing the SOA of promoting terrorism and demanding the closing of the school. (By 2001, half of the nearly 10,000 protesters at the SOA vigil were college students.) By the mid-1990s SOA Watch articulated that its focus was much broader than that of closing the controversial school, and like Witness For Peace and other Latin American peace organizations, included the global giants of the IMF, the World Bank, globalized capitalism, sweatshops, and the growing poverty in Latin America.

In December 2000, Bourgeois and his movement had won enough support from Congress and the American public to motivate the U.S. Army to close the U.S. Army School of the Americas. Three weeks later the school was reopened in the same building under a new name—The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC). The School of the Americas Watch equates this "change" with dousing perfume on a toxic waste dump. The new institute spokespersons claim that it is a new school with a new curriculum and with a new respect for human rights. The movement to close the school continues under the same name, as it believes it is fighting to close the same school.

When asked what will happen if indeed the SOA/WHISC is closed, Bourgeois responds with unadorned simplicity: "First, we'll all gather at the gates of Fort Benning, Georgia, and have a fiesta to celebrate our victory!" But then in the same serious voice he responds that "beyond

the SOA is a life-long struggle, and our struggle is connected to the problems of Latin America."[24]

Recently in almost every one of the territories that the United States acquired as a result of the Cuban–Spanish American War of 1898, movements have begun challenging U.S. hegemony. On the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, an entire community banded together to put pressure on the U.S. marines to stop live bombing and to leave the island altogether. The U.S. Navy has used the island of Vieques as a bombing range for more than sixty years, arguing that the island is vital for training and national security.[25]

Robert Rabin went to Vieques in 1980 as a graduate student to study the impact of the U.S. military presence there and stayed to live among the Viequenses, teaching history at Vieques High School. In 1993, he helped to organize the Committee for the Rescue of Vieques, the principal protest organization on the island.[26] In 1999 a galvanizing event unified Puerto Ricans, not just Viequenses, in opposition to the pervasive U.S. military presence on the island. On April 19, 1999, David Sanes, a security guard for the U.S. Navy, was killed during a drill in which the Navy dropped 2,500 bombs. Two bombs went astray and killed Sanes. According to Rabin, this event "shook the consciousness of Puerto Rico and galvanized mass support to end the bombing on the island."[27] Two days later, the committee sent people to the bombing range and planted a cross where Sanes was killed.[28] After that, Viequenses, along with supporters from around the world, realized the growth of a well-organized, large-scale movement determined to end the military presence on Vieques. By mid-May there were fourteen civil-disobedience camps on the military base, and churches set up most of them. On what was a historically conservative island, there quickly emerged a consensus that the U.S. Navy should leave. Fishermen, teacher's unions, women's alliances, the Catholic Church, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Pentecostals all set up camps on the military base and risked six-month prison sentences for trespassing. Support for the movement also crossed deeply divided ideological lines—leaders of the Statehood Party, the governor of Puerto Rico, and leaders of the Independent Party all agreed to the demilitarization of Vieques. The U.S. Navy left Vieques on May 1, 2003, partly as a result of the protests and popular support to oust the Marines but also because the new war on terror and the war in Iraq presented the military with much larger issues. But Rabin was prepared for this event long before it happened. In 2001 Rabin stated that "Vieques is not only an example of an organized

community in struggle, but an experiment in the transformation of Vieques. The committee is dedicated to the demilitarization of Vieques, the return of military land to Viequenses, the detoxification of Vieques, as well as sustainable development for the island."[29] Rabin went further to say that the movement on Vieques "supports demilitarization, not just in Vieques but also throughout the world ... the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques appropriately links the struggle in Vieques to Puerto Rico's struggle for self-determination. When you speak of Vieques, you speak of Puerto Rico and the urgent need to decolonize and propagate a true process of self-determination."[30]

In 2000 hundreds of indigenous representatives, campesino organizers, grassroots activists, journalists, and internationals marched in solidarity through the streets of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, marking the closing of the Second Forum, Xelaju "Frente a la Globalizacion, El Pueblo Es Primero" (People First before Globalization). Over 800 delegates representing 262 organizations participated in the three-day event to develop strategies and to organize proposals in resistance to the neoliberal model for development in Latin America. Passing street markets, street vendors, and McDonalds, voices shouted "Honduras, Presente! El Salvador, Presente! Costa Rica, Presente! Belize, Presente! Mexico, Presente! Guatemala, Presente!" All over Latin America there is emerging resistance to free trade and free-market plans, to U.S. military and political intervention, and to the disrespect for indigenous treaties and rights. And NGOs in the United States are responding to the call for solidarity with those who are affected most adversely by U.S. policies in Latin America.[31]

In the wake of the crisis of September 11, 2001, in the United States, Latin American nations must refrain from recognizing any responsibility on the part of the United States in promoting terrorism. In early November 2001, the National Security Agency, the Pentagon, and the U.S. State Department held a two-day meeting on U.S. policy toward Venezuela. The catalyst for this meeting was President Hugo Chavez's comment that "bombing Afghanistan is the equivalent of fighting terrorism with terrorism."[32] In response, the Bush administration temporarily withdrew its ambassador from Venezuela and convened the meeting. The fact is, however, that all over Latin America, the press has implicated the United States as having some responsibility for promoting terrorism. Even Fidel Castro has waxed more eloquently on the topic than he has in years, and the Latin American media has included excerpts from his speeches that call into question the use of force to stop terrorism. Rigoberta

Menchu, the Guatemalan activist, wrote President Bush a letter in response to his statement that "all nations in all regions of the world must now make a decision: You are with us or with the terrorists."[33] She admonished, "Before you give the cry for war, I would like to invite you to think about a different type of world leadership, one which must convince rather than conquer, in which the human species can show that in the last 1,000 years we have overcome the idea of an eye for an eye."[34]

The U.S. movement aimed at changing U.S. policies in Latin America is tied closely to movements within Latin America that aim to bring about more equitable and just societies, to end military abuses, and to foster local development. The movement that once targeted U.S. support for Contras and government terrorism in Latin America in the 1980s has evolved into a broader call to end U.S. hegemony, militarism, and the imposition of stringent neoliberal economic policies in the region. There is a growing movement at home and in Latin America that is working to undermine the historical roots of U.S. intervention. In addition, the U.S.–Latin American peace movement that has developed over the past decade has identified particular economic and political issues as problematic, such as NAFTA, the FTAA, the IMF, and U.S. militarization, and made connections to U.S. religious groups, college students, labor unions, and other groups of concerned citizens. Never has the movement to change U.S. policies in Latin America enlisted such broad-based support. For the first time in history indigenous movements, movements for self-determination, labor, and student movements are linking arms to oppose U.S. policies in Latin America as well as the giants of global capital. United States hegemony is finding worthy adversaries in both halves of the hemisphere, while at the same time the U.S. government continues to employ antiquated arguments for maintaining the status quo in U.S.–Latin American relations.

ENDNOTES

1. Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 90.

2. See Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S.–Central American Peace Movement* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

3. According to Witness for Peace activist Mike Clark, by 1989 both long- and short-term witnesses began turning down calls to help the organization, citing that their husbands' vacations fell at that time or that they had in-laws

visiting—something that never would have interfered with Witness for Peace business in 1985 or 1986 at the height of the wars in Central America. Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 353.

4. See Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk, eds., *From Act Up to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* (New York: Verso, 2002).

5. Ed Griffin-Nolan, *Witness for Peace* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

6. The idea for delegations came about in 1983 when the founding members realized that a village in Nicaragua had been attacked the day before the delegation arrived and subsequently had been attacked the day after the delegation left. One of the founders commented that "we ought to just stay here then they won't attack the villagers." The group then came up with the idea of long- and short-term delegations to keep a constant presence in Nicaragua. Interview with Gale Phares, Raleigh, North Carolina, November 29, 2001.

7. Witness for Peace Papers, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, (hereafter cited as WPP, SCPC) ACC 01A-041.

8. Patrice McSherry, "Preserving Hegemony: National Security Doctrine in the Post-Cold War Era," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 34 (November–December 2000): 34.

9. Ibid.

10. "Face to Face Minutes," April 18, 1991, WPP, SCPC.

11. Financial reports for Witness for Peace show a deficit for the years 1991 through 1994. It was not until 1995 that the WFP financial picture had turned around. ACC 01A-041, WPP, SCPC.

12. WFP activist Jim Flynn, who was in Mexico when the Chiapas rebellion began, called another WFP board member in the United States on New Year's Day to report the event. "Hello, this is Jim Flynn. I am sorry to bother you at home and on a holiday, but there is a peasant uprising here in Chiapas that you should know about." WPP, SCPC, 1994.

13. Arturo Santamaria Gomez, "Zapatistas Deliver a Message from Deep Mexico", *Z Magazine*, March 1994, 31.

14. Ibid.

15. Witness for Peace Newsletter, Summer 1996, 2.

16. Ibid. Gail Phares, southeast coordinator for WFP and WFP founder and board member, confirmed the mission statement change. Interview with Phares.

17. Griffin-Nolan, *Witness for Peace*, 205.

18. WFP Newsletter, Summer 2003, 3.

19. McSheery, "Preserving Hegemony," 34.

20. Remarks of U.S. president George W. Bush to the World Affairs Council at the Organization of American States, January 24, 2002, http://www.oas.org/OASpage/eng/remarks.

21. Ibid.

22. Eduardo Galeano, "Argentina Pays Debt to Democracy", http://www.progressive_org/0901/gal0202.html.

23. Interview with Fr. Roy Bourgeois Columbus, Georgia, January 24, 2002.

24. Ibid.

25. Cordero Ventura Cruz, *Vieques: Sesenta Anos de Bombardeos en Tiempos de Paz* (Sixty Years of Bombing Times of Peace), Comité Pro Rescate y Desarrollo de Vieques (Committee for the Rescue and Defense of Vieques), 2001.

26. Interview with Robert Rabin, Vieques, Puerto Rico, December 16, 2001.

27. Ibid.

28. The spot where Sanes was killed became known as Monte David to the movement in Vieques.

29. Interview with Rabin.

30. Ibid.

31. A mostly religious movement, Jubilee 2000 (founded in Britain in the mid-1990s) helped to organize churches and secular organizations to cancel the debt of poor nations.

32. Conn Hallinan, "The Scent of Another Coup: The U.S. and Venezuela," *San Francisco Examiner*, December 28, 2001, 3.

33. Open letter from Nobel Laureate Rigoberta Menchu to President George W. Bush, September 23, 2001, www.globalresearch.ca/articles/MEN109A (September 26, 2001).

34. Ibid.

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