

Senator Jesse Helms and Conservative Foreign Policy in
Central America, 1972-1992

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Abstract

This thesis examines the policies of Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) toward Central America between 1972 and 1992, focusing on El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Panama. It places the senator within the context of several historiographies, including the rise of modern American conservatism, Latin America's Cold War, and the role of Congress and congressional entrepreneurs in the formulation of foreign policy. In doing so, it rejects the idea of a uniform conservative foreign policy in the late Cold War, and adds to literature that points out the often-fractious relationships among conservatives over how to reconcile principle and the realities of government. Helms emerges as a resolute protector of a principled conservative international agenda, doing so through a campaign of entrepreneurship that enjoyed considerable successes while also suffering notable failures.

Chapter one examines Jesse Helms' policies in Panama, and, specifically, the Panama Canal Treaties. It illustrates how he shaped a conservative opposition that rejected any transfer of the waterway to the Panamanian government. Chapter two focuses on Helms and Nicaragua between 1979 and 1984, as he worked to build an anti-communist strategy that later became known as the Reagan Doctrine. Chapter three looks at the senator's work in El Salvador, where his relationship with the Reagan administration was almost non-existent. Chapter four returns to Nicaragua, looking at how Helms coped with the dramatic collapse of Contra policy in the wake of the Iran-Contra scandals, the Esquipulas peace accords, and the 1990 election defeat for the Sandinistas. Chapter five considers Helms' efforts to force the United States to reconsider its alliance with Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega, and how this effort led the senator to an unlikely but effective alliance with liberal and moderate foes in Congress.

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Author's Declaration

The work contained in this thesis is the author's, and the author's alone. All supporting work and evidence has been referenced accordingly. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. Material in the Nicaragua chapters is expanded from an article titled "What You Know and Who You Know: Senator Jesse Helms, the Reagan Doctrine and the Nicaraguan Contras", which was published in the universities of Birmingham and Nottingham's *49th Parallel* journal (Volume 33, Winter 2014). I am grateful to the journal's editors for their permission to use the material here.

Introduction

When Senator Jesse Helms passed away on 4 July, 2008, Phyllis Schlafly, the godmother of modern American conservatism, fondly remembered the senator as ‘the authentic voice of conservatism for three decades.’ Helms, she said, ‘was a role model of an incorruptible public official who adhered to principle despite the pressures that surround those with political power, and he gave us a standard by which others can be measured.’ The title of Schlafly’s eulogy, printed in the pages of the ultra-conservative magazine *Human Events*, was simple but powerful: ‘The Most Important Senator of Our Times’.¹

Helms’ reputation among post-war conservatives was forged on the back of a passionate commitment to a modern American conservative movement that reshaped the political landscape of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. In his pre-Senate career as congressional aide, banking lobbyist, and media commentator, and over thirty years representing his home state of North Carolina in the Senate, Helms worked to deconstruct the liberal New Deal-Great Society state that had dominated the middle years of the twentieth century. In its place, Helms sought a United States in which the role of government was significantly reduced, religion and traditionalism defined social norms, and foreign policy was predicated upon a commitment to expanding the forces of ‘freedom’ around the world. In a sign of appreciation for the consistency

¹ Phyllis Schlafly, “The Most Important Senator of Our Times,” *Human Events*, 8 July, 2008 accessed 21 June, 2014, <http://www.humanevents.com/2008/07/08/jesse-helms-the-most-important-senator-of-our-times>.

and vigour of his efforts, the American Conservative Union awarded Helms a one hundred per cent rating every year from 1974 onwards.²

Though modern conservatives attached great importance to Helms' contributions to their movement, it was only toward the end of his life that scholars began to pay close attention to his influence. Ernest Fergurson's 1986 biography was a richly detailed account of Helms' life and political career to that date, but its journalist author never fully asked questions of where the senator fitted into a conservative movement that was enjoying a period of national prominence.³ It took until the early 2000s, and Bryan Hardin Thrift's doctoral thesis, "Jesse Helms, the New Right, and American Freedom" for a serious scholarly assessment of Helms' relationship with the post-war right. Thrift argued that Helms constructed a new form of conservative politics, 'a deft combination of populist and elitist conservatism.' Harnessing southern conservatism, but expanding upon it with 'ideological rigor, media savvy, and Republican Party connections', Helms helped construct a national New Right.⁴

Thrift's work was followed by William Link's full-length biography, *Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism*, before Tom Packer added further academic rigour to the study of Helms with his recent doctoral work on the senator and North Carolina politics in the 1970s and early 1980s.⁵ Packer astutely pointed out the largely non-

² The only exception was 1973, when the ACU gave the senator 96, due to three missed votes. See ACU Ratings, *American Conservative Union*, accessed 1 July, 2014, <http://www.conservative.org/legislative-ratings>.

³ See Ernest B. Fergurson, *Hard Right: The Rise of Jesse Helms* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986).

⁴ See Bryan Hardin Thrift, "Jesse Helms, the New Right, and American Freedom" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 2005), 1.

⁵ William A. Link, *Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), and Tom Packer, "Jesse Helms and North Carolina Politics, 1972-1984" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oxford, 2012).

partisan nature of Helms' politics, which revolved around a consistent commitment to movement conservative principles, not necessarily those of the wider Republican Party. With the help of revolutionary fundraising techniques and organisational machinery, Helms was able to harness sufficient support to maintain his position in Washington D.C. Packer tied Helms to the wider New Right organisation, as well as a movement conservative community that he argues reinforced Helms' positions in the Senate.

Link's biography, the most comprehensive assessment of Helms' life and political career to date, took as a starting point a more elite-oriented view of modern conservatism. Although recognizing that grassroots developments were critical to the growth of post-war conservatism, Link nevertheless stressed the role of national leaders who 'helped to forge a national constituency, to communicate with it effectively, and to mobilize it politically.' Individuals, Link argued, matter.⁶

Mapping Modern American Conservatism

Link's methodology and arguments drew upon an older tradition of scholarship on post-war conservatism that emphasised the centrality of a national, elite-led movement. This historiographical interpretation emerged in the late 1960s, as historians began to reject the dismissive accounts of American conservatism put forward by liberal consensus scholars of the preceding twenty years. Instead of portraying modern conservatism as a dysfunctional pathology in the long history of American liberalism, as Louis Hartz, Daniel Bell, and Richard Hofstadter (among others) argued, first wave scholars identified a specific and consistent strand of conservative thought in the United States.⁷ They picked out the

⁶ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 5.

⁷ See Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), and Louis Hartz, *The Liberal*

leaders of the post-war movement, and fashioned a more nuanced understanding of the ideological principles behind post-war American conservatism.⁸

Nevertheless, for Alan Brinkley, writing in 1994 for the *American Historical Review*, first-wave scholarship remained unsatisfactory. He declared, in a discussion centred on his essay “The Problem of American Conservatism”, that the study of modern conservatism was ‘something of an orphan’.⁹ Existing scholarship had marginalised and even ignored the lessons of modern conservatism, and research was needed to find ‘a suitable place for the Right... within our historiographical concerns’, where new frameworks would make better sense of the ‘diverse and inconsistent’ traditions of conservatism.¹⁰ Others were sceptical of this pessimism regarding early work on conservatism – Leo Ribuffo, for example, pointed out that first-wave scholarship was both ‘more extensive and better’ than

Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).

⁸ For first wave scholarship, see J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *Watch on the Right: Conservative Intellectuals in the Reagan Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* (New York: Perennial Library, 1988), John P. Diggins, *Up From Communism: Conservative Odysseys in American Intellectual History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), and Allen Guttman, *The Conservative Tradition in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). Other works in first-wave scholarship include Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right: Conservative Protestant Politics in America, 1978-1988* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), Desmond S. King, *The New Right: Politics, Markets and Citizenship* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), Gillian Peele, *Revival and Reaction: The Right in Contemporary America* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), A. James Reichley, *Conservatives in an Age of Change: The Nixon and Ford Administrations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1981), and George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

⁹ Alan Brinkley, “Response to the Comments of Leo Ribuffo and Susan Yohn,” *American Historical Review* 99, No. 2 (April, 1994): 450-452.

¹⁰ Brinkley, “Response,” 410, and Alan Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism,” *American Historical Review* 99, No. 2 (April, 1994): 409-429.

Brinkley acknowledged – but a new generation of historians nevertheless decided to take up Brinkley’s challenge.¹¹

In doing so, this post-Brinkley second wave asked how and why the post-war right achieved such prominence in the period given the apparent dominance of New Deal-Great Society liberalism.¹² Their explanations varied. In her examination of the grass-roots conservatism of Orange Country, California, Lisa McGirr stressed a shared anti-communism that drew together white, educated, and upwardly mobile conservatives of “Reagan Country” in the 1950s and 1960s.¹³ Matthew Lassiter, Joseph Crespino, and Kevin Kruse looked at the racial backlash politics of southern

¹¹ Leo P. Ribuffo, “Why is There so Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything about It,” *American Historical Review* 99, No. 2 (April, 1994): 438-449.

¹² For overviews of this second wave, see the roundtable discussion in *The Journal of American History’s* December 2011 edition, particularly Kim Phillips-Fein’s, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” *The Journal of American History* 98, No. 3 (December, 2011): 723-743, as well as Julian Zelizer, “Reflections: Rethinking the History of American Conservatism,” *Reviews in American History* 38, No. 2 (2010): 367-392, Leo P. Ribuffo, “The Discovery and Rediscovery of American Conservatism Broadly Conceived,” *OAH Magazine of History* 17, No. 2, Conservatism (January, 2003): 5-10.

¹³ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

conservatism.¹⁴ Some scholars picked out the evangelical Christian right as a focal point, while still others, notably Kim Phillips-Fein, focused on the role of anti-New Deal business leaders.¹⁵ Regardless of their specific concerns, however, second wave historiography accepted the importance of grassroots conservative activists and organisers in moulding a movement capable of challenging post-war liberalism.

Despite this substantial body of work, important areas of the modern conservative movement are yet to be examined. Julian Zelizer has pointed out that the coherence of modern conservatism has often been exaggerated, owing to the tendency of second-wave scholars to seek issues that brought conservatives together.¹⁶ A third wave of scholarship, Zelizer suggests, should now look more closely at the inconsistencies and fault lines of conservatism, especially in the context of its transition from opposition to national office holders at the start of the 1980s. 'A new look', he states, 'will not downplay the centrality of conservatism in contemporary politics but, just the opposite, provide a better appreciation for how they achieved what they did given the numerous internal and

¹⁴ Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). Despite focusing on the south, Kruse, Lassiter, and Crespino rejected the myth of southern exceptionalism. Instead, they argued, like many white suburbanites across the country, southern conservatives reinforced the status quo of race relations through their control of low-level regulation. Dan Carter, while sharing their concern with placing Southern politics within a broader, national context, nevertheless argued in his work on Alabama governor George Wallace that there was a distinct racial backlash politics in the development of modern conservatism. Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1995).

¹⁵ Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).

¹⁶ Zelizer, "Rethinking the History," 370.

external obstacles they faced.¹⁷ Writing in 2011, one year after Zelizer, Kim Phillips-Fein pointed out that modern conservative foreign policy also deserved closer inspection – an especially profitable area given, as Brinkley noted, the ‘ample evidence for distinctive conservative arguments about America’s role in the world’.¹⁸

Jesse Helms and Conservative Foreign Policy for Central America

In Central America, during the final decade and a half of the Cold War, Jesse Helms defined one of these distinctive conservative arguments. Grounded in the three essential ingredients of post-war conservative ideology – anti-communism, economic liberalism, and traditionalism – the senator’s foreign policy vision was simple in its prescription for the region: ‘there is no substitute for military victory over the Communist forces in Central America’, he proclaimed, ‘and there is no substitute for free enterprise to bring prosperity and a better life for all in the region. It is at our peril that we forget these fundamental truths.’¹⁹

It was a basic message, but a popular one among post-war conservatives who accepted both the threat of international communism – ‘messianic world-conquering’ Communism, as conservative icon Frank Meyer described it – and the necessity of an expanded national security state to counter it.²⁰ Owing much to the theoretical contributions of James Burnham, one of the movement’s most prominent intellectuals and an

¹⁷ Ibid., 386.

¹⁸ Kim Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 98, No. 3 (December, 2011), 735, and Alan Brinkley, “Conservatism as a Growing Field of Study,” *Journal of American History* 98, No. 3 (December, 2011), 749.

¹⁹ Jesse Helms (NC), “The Elections In El Salvador,” *Congressional Record* (hereafter *Cong. Rec.*) 130 (1984), 10694.

²⁰ Frank S. Meyer, “Consensus and Divergence,” in *What is Conservatism?*, ed. Frank S. Meyer (New York: Holt, Rinehardt and Winston, 1964), 231.

editor of the influential *National Review* magazine, modern conservatives reached a consensus that rejected the remnant of World War II-era isolationism as dangerously naïve.²¹ Instead, as Burnham advocated, an outward looking, activist foreign policy was required to protect domestic liberties by first defeating the apocalyptic external threat posed by the Soviet Union and its proxies. Containment and détente, shibboleths of the foreign policy establishment, were criticised as weak and defeatist. Burnham and his disciples instead argued that the only viable path to victory was to take the offensive and liberate nations under communist control via, among other approaches, large-scale propaganda campaigns and wholehearted support for anti-communist liberation movements. Post-war conservative foreign policy ideas largely developed from this framework.²²

Helms' advocacy for free enterprise was founded on Wilhelm Röpke's conservative maxim that '[t]he economy is freedom's first line of defense.'²³ The senator, as part of a general consensus in modern conservative philosophy, saw the pursuit of this freedom in fusionist economic thought, which combined economic liberalism with moral traditionalism. To Helms

²¹ Two of the most prominent isolationist dissidents were Frank Chodorov and Murray Rothbard. For their criticism of outward-looking Cold War foreign policy, see Frank Chodorov, *Out of Step: The Autobiography of an Individualist* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1962), and Murray Rothbard, *For A New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2006), accessed 13 April 2013, <http://library.mises.org/books/Murray%20N%20Rothbard/For%20a%20New%20Liberty%20The%20Libertarian%20Manifesto.pdf>.

²² For an overview of Burnham's contributions, see Jerome Himmelstein, *To The Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 38-40. Burnham's career at *National Review* is recounted by his colleague Jeffrey Hart in his history of the publication, *The Making of the American Conservative Mind: National Review and its Times* (Wilmington: Isi Books, 2007).

²³ William Röpke, "Education in Economic Liberty," in *What is Conservatism?*, ed. Frank S. Meyer (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 78.

and other advocates, among whom were conservative intellectual icons like Frank Meyer, William Buckley, and M. Stanton Evans, fusionism dictated that the pursuit of prosperity could only be undertaken within a moral framework founded on the spiritual traditions of the United States and, more broadly, western civilisation.²⁴ This would simultaneously legitimise a citizen's economic liberty, and strengthen the nation's moral fortitude in line with the absolute and transcendental morals of the west.²⁵

Helms' fusionist ideal represented what Jerome Himmelstein has defined as 'pristine capitalism'. This was a model in which the accumulation of wealth never gave way to the baser elements of the free market. Thus, the emphasis was on the entrepreneur, not the monopolist. Ownership of personal property and tools of production was favoured over the control of stock and bonds. While these aspects of capitalism were not attacked, pristine capitalists believed they were not vital to the system.²⁶ Pristine capitalism evoked an era of rural agrarianism, in which a sense of individual productivity and self-sufficiency were at the heart of the citizen's, and the nation's, economic life. Helms spoke of this ideal with fondness when he recalled that his family 'were no strangers to simple living, and our economy was tied to agriculture more than manufacturing. We stuck to the basics and hoped for the best.'²⁷

²⁴ Traditionalists, such as Russell Kirk, Richard Weaver, and Robert Nisbet, did not reject outright the importance of economic liberty in a free society, but they happily recalled the moral purpose and spiritual foundations of the previous century and shared a strain of anti-capitalism reminiscent of the populist movements of the nineteenth century. Himmelstein, *To The Right*, 45-53 and Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 97-98.

²⁵ A cogent assertion of this position can be found in M. Stanton Evans, "Raico on Liberalism and Religion," *New Individualist Review* 4, No. 2 (Winter, 1966), accessed 12 April 2013, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/2136/195435>.

²⁶ Himmelstein, *To The Right*, 47.

²⁷ Helms, *Here's Where I Stand*, 4.

Together, anti-communism, fusionism, and pristine capitalism provided the intellectual foundation for Helms' Central America policy.²⁸ They very much fit into what Mendelbaum and Schneider described, in 1979, as 'conservative internationalism'. It was a vision that 'pictures the world primarily in East-West terms: democracy versus tyranny, capitalism versus communism, freedom versus repression', and provided for a more competitive internationalism than its liberal alternative.²⁹ Julian Zelizer's more recent examination of the national security state during the Cold War, *Arsenal of Democracy*, offers a similar description: a right-wing opposition to Cold War policies emerged from discontent over the 1945 Yalta conference, subsequent containment doctrine, and détente. Helms' broad strategic framework for international affairs is a case study in the application of this thinking.³⁰

It is also an example of the manner in which contesting visions of 'conservative internationalism' played out. Henry Nau's 2013 *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy Under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* argued that the ideas of conservative internationalism were not exclusively devoted to the application of power, but rather sought to promote freedom through diplomatic initiatives tempered by force. Nau rejected the idea that this was a Cold War phenomenon, and traced the ideology back to Thomas Jefferson – though he believe Ronald Reagan to be

²⁸ See Jesse Helms, "A New Policy for Latin America." *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Affairs* 1, No. 1 (January, 1976): 15-20.

²⁹ Michael Mandelbaum and William Schneider, "The New Internationalisms," in *Eagle Entangled: U.S. Foreign Policy in a Complex World*, eds. Kenneth A. Oye, Donald Rothchild, and Robert J. Lieber (New York: Longman, 1979), 63. See also Eugene R. Wittkopf, *Faces of Internationalism: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

³⁰ Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy: The Politics of National Security – From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 83-96.

the foremost exponent of these principles. Helms was certainly suspicious of centralised international organisations and liberal internationalism, thus fitting within Nau's model, but at the same time it can hardly be argued that he saw diplomatic solutions as an equal goal alongside the projection of American power.

Central America was a crucible for this conservative internationalist agenda. While the senator held an active interest in many areas of the Cold War world, from East Asia to Africa, the fate of Central America was a particular priority from the mid-1970s until the early 1990s. His concern, a common one among movement conservatives, was that the relentless march of communist expansionism in the United States' backyard spelled an imminent threat to both the country's ideological principles and its territory. It wasn't simply that communist guerrillas in Central America would sweep up over the U.S.-Mexico border if their progress was unchecked, but that American republicanism would be demolished as communism infected the country's social, economic, and political life.

Wider American interest in Central America has been assigned various motivations by scholars. Some see a response to perceived failings in Vietnam a decade earlier. As William M. LeoGrande argues in *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, the definitive account of American policies in the region, policymakers saw a way 'to exorcise the ghosts of Vietnam and renew the national will to use force abroad.'³¹ Greg Grandin, who likewise sees a determined effort by the U.S. to restore its lost power in the wake of Vietnam, believes U.S. intervention was a means of expanding its global hegemony.³² Thomas Carothers, more

³¹ William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1998), 590. Alan McPherson also ties intervention to Vietnam in *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945* (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006).

³² Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

sympathetically, saw a genuine desire among American officials to spread democracy throughout the region.³³ Helms' record indicates a pre-occupation with the re-application of force in a post-Vietnam world, as well as a desire to expand those ideals he saw as American freedoms – including, of course, democracy. It also says much about the critical importance of national security considerations and anti-communism. Indeed, this was the overwhelming concern among those conservatives who shared Helms' interest in the region in this period.

That the senator identified the region as critical to the Cold War also says much about the importance of the so-called periphery to those who intended to fight communism wherever it was perceived to be growing. As much as the Cold War was about the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, as mainstream historians such as John Lewis Gaddis tend to emphasise, Third World players were critical in shaping, and being shaped by, the conflict.³⁴ Odd Arne Westad's globalist Cold War scholarship, in which local actors are shown to be of vital importance in 'abetting and facilitating' U.S. intervention in the Third World, demands a broader approach to the periphery.³⁵ There is a danger in striving to see the periphery as the dominant agent – something Westad's work has been criticised for – but it is nevertheless the case that through Helms' work in Central America we can better understand just how relevant it is to speak of a "broad" Cold War.

³³ Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy: U.S. Policy Toward Latin America in the Reagan Years* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

³⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007); *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³⁵ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 397.

However, Helms' record also suggests the need to treat the term 'conservative internationalism' with care, and in doing so question overly broad foreign policy categorisations that ignore the subtleties, inconsistencies and contradictions within the post-war right's foreign policy agenda. As Colin Dueck rightly argues, conservative foreign policy was characterised by 'sheer variety' and 'recurring tensions'.³⁶ Helms' interventionism, for example, and fear for the future of western civilisations should Central America fall to communism, did not translate into calls for U.S. troops to fight in the jungles of El Salvador and Nicaragua. While unilateralist and deeply suspicious of multilateral power structures, the senator nevertheless embraced a transnational conservative community that included actors and organisations from Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica (as well as, of course, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Panama). He worked with dictators and repressive oligarchs to support a social and political status quo that had stunted equality and social justice throughout the region during the twentieth century, but also lauded the region's democratic transition and supported democracy, albeit tightly defined as the presence of free elections and a free-market economy.

As such, Helms' case exemplifies the importance of making sure that conservative foreign policy is not oversimplified, and that scholars recognise the multitude of agendas among the post-war right. Robert Mason, Julian Zelizer, and Sandra Scanlon have each highlighted how the late 1960s and early 1970s saw a fragmentation in the right's foreign policies, as sharp disagreements over President Nixon's Vietnam strategy and rapprochement with China and the Soviet Union led a hard-line conservative community to condemn the president's retreat from the war in South East Asia and embrace of Henry Kissinger's realism and détente.³⁷

³⁶ Colin Dueck, *Hard-Line: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 28-30.

³⁷ See Robert Mason, *The Republican Party and American Politics from Hoover to Reagan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Robert

Helms' contribution to the debates over the relationship between pragmatism in power, and movement principles, emerged out of this intra-Republican debate in the early 1970s.

Later, in the 1980s, the Reagan Doctrine, which was at the core of the senator's foreign policy in Central America, became another battleground over principle and pragmatism between conservatives. The doctrine supported anti-communist rebels in their conflicts with socialist governments, and was first articulated by conservative *Time* columnist Charles Krauthammer in 1985. Krauthammer declared Reagan's backing for the Contras in Nicaragua, mujahedeen in Afghanistan, and UNITA rebels in Angola was 'overt and unashamed American support for anti-Communist revolution' on the grounds of 'justice, necessity and democratic tradition', and he saw a uniform implementation of the strategy across these countries.³⁸ Subsequent scholars and commentators, including those who worked on Reagan's foreign policies, have challenged Krauthammer's assertions over the coherence of the doctrine. What has emerged over three decades of scholarship is an understanding that the Reagan Doctrine was, like the administration's foreign policy more generally, a fragmented, changeable, and contested means of implementing a conservative foreign policy vision.³⁹

Mason, "Foreign Policy and the Republican Quest for a New Majority," in *Seeking a New Majority: The Republican Party and American Politics, 1960-1980*, eds. Robert Mason and Iwan Morgan, 169-187 (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2013), Sandra Scanlon, "Building Consensus: The Republican Right and Foreign Policy, 1960-1980," in *Seeking a New Majority: The Republican Party and American Politics, 1960-1980*, eds. Robert Mason and Iwan Morgan, 152-168 (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2013), Robert Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy*, 240-243, and Sandra Scanlon, "The Conservative Lobby and Nixon's "Peace with Honor" in Vietnam," *Journal of American Studies* 43, No. 2 (August, 2009): 255-276.

³⁸ Charles Krauthammer, "The Reagan Doctrine," *Time*, 1 April, 1985.

³⁹ Edward A. Lynch, *The Cold War's Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011),

The most important of these works is James M. Scott's 1996 *Deciding to Intervene*, which showed how a fragmented Reagan Doctrine was constructed from competing 'constellations' of policy activists that came together in support of common causes.⁴⁰ Scott relied on Peter Rodman's contentious study of the Cold War in the Third World for its theoretical framework, in which the decision-makers were divided into three competing factions: advocates, pragmatists, and opponents. Disagreement stemmed not from divergent strategic goals – conservatives were united in seeking to undermine communist government – but from competing visions of power and force. Advocates embraced power and rejected diplomacy, while opponents prioritised diplomacy over force. Pragmatists fell in the middle, looking to balance the two in pursuit of foreign policy goals.⁴¹ Rodman's work was justly criticised as a paean to the Doctrine and 'a testament to American exceptionalism', but the author's service in the National Security Council during the Reagan administration was helpful in

Chester Pach, "The Reagan Doctrine: Principle, Pragmatism, and Policy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, No. 1, Presidential Doctrines (March, 2006): 75-88, Mark P. Lagon, *The Reagan Doctrine: Sources of American Conduct in the Cold War's Last Chapter* (Westport: Praeger, 1994), Michael McFaul, "Rethinking the "Reagan Doctrine" in Angola," *International Security* 14, No. 3 (Winter 1989-1990): 99-135, and Robert W. Tucker, "Reagan's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 68, No. 1, America and the World 1988/89 (1988/1989): 1-27. Jeane Kirkpatrick, Reagan's envoy to the United Nations and a prominent neoconservative in the administration, charitably described the doctrine as an 'evolving set of policies and principles' in her introduction to Walter Hahn's 1987 edited collection of laudatory *Strategic Review* articles. Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Introduction," in *Central America and the Reagan Doctrine*, ed. Walter F. Hahn (Boston: The Centre for International Relations, 1987), xvi.

⁴⁰ James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

⁴¹ Peter Rodman, *More Precious than Peace: The Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1994).

revealing the multiple and shifting alliances which operated in pursuit of differing approaches to the doctrine.⁴²

This policy fragmentation, especially during the Reagan administration, was critical for Helms in his quest to influence Central America policy. The continued rejection of the Imperial Presidency, and further discord between those unwilling to jettison détente and Reaganites preaching a more militarised international agenda, provided scope for individual members of Congress to identify spaces of policy autonomy.⁴³ Helms achieved influence because he was better able to locate and take advantage of these spaces than many of his fellow legislators. He recognised that traditional sources of policy influence, such as committee assignments, personnel appointments, and legislation, were still important in the late Cold War. Yet he astutely understood that he could achieve a greater influence in foreign policy by also working outside these avenues. Thus he encouraged greater independence within his fiercely ideological staff, and cultivated an extensive network of contacts around the world that provided an unrivalled information-gathering apparatus as well as access to participants in the foreign policy process – what John Kingdon describes as ‘players in the game.’⁴⁴

At the heart of this network was a selection of aides employed by Helms in Washington D.C. Whether on his office staff or assigned to the

⁴² For criticism of Rodman’s work, see Stephan G. Rabe, “*More Precious than Peace: The Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World* by Peter W. Rodman,” *The American Historical Review* 101, No. 2 (April, 1996): 593, and Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, “*More Precious Than Peace: The Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World* by Peter W. Rodman,” *Political Science Quarterly* 110, No. 2 (Summer, 1995): 346-347.

⁴³ Richard A. Melanson, *American Foreign Policy Since The Vietnam War: The Search for Consensus from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2005), 4.

⁴⁴ John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (New York: Longman, 1995), 21.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee, this group was committed to the movement conservative agenda, and afforded extensive latitude by the senator to fulfil this mission in Central America. Their conservative credentials were impeccable. Christopher Manion, for instance, was the son of Clarence Manion, the Old Right isolationist media commentator who had forged links between business executives and the growing national conservative movement in the aftermath of World War II. The elder Manion helped persuade Barry Goldwater to run for the presidency in 1964, and was invited by William F. Buckley Jr. to join the founding board of directors at *National Review*. During Helms' pre-Senate career, Manion spoke to North Carolina businessmen at Helms' request, and he later campaigned for Helms in his 1972 Senate election race.⁴⁵

Deborah DeMoss, one of the senator's most active staffers in Latin America, was also part of an important, albeit less public, conservative family.⁴⁶ Her father, Arthur DeMoss, had created the Atlanta-based DeMoss Foundation, funding evangelical missionary work across the United States and abroad. Highly secretive about its work, the DeMoss Foundation has been identified as an early and leading influence on the modern Christian Right that was itself absolutely critical to both Helms' worldview and electoral success.⁴⁷ As scholars of modern American religion and modern American conservatism acknowledge, the organisational savvy of the New Christian Right combined with its dire warnings over Cold War social and

⁴⁵ Manion's life and contribution to modern conservatism, especially in its Goldwater 1964 guise, are examined in Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001). For Manion's relationship with Helms, see Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, 81-86.

⁴⁶ DeMoss married a colonel in the Honduran military in 1993, becoming DeMoss Fonseca.

⁴⁷ See William Martin, author of *With God on Our Side*, in David Van Biema, "Who Are Those Guys?" *Time*, 1 August, 1999, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,28859-1,00.html>, accessed 5 July, 2014.

political decay were fundamental in the rise of modern conservatism.⁴⁸ Helms, a staunch Southern Baptist, whose electoral success owed much to the work of Sunbelt Christian activists, echoed the Cold War anti-communist fervour of earlier twentieth century preachers who had stoked controversy with their scathing attacks on those unwilling to face the truth about the spread of socialist ideology.⁴⁹

The most flamboyant character on Helms' staff was John Carbaugh, who, though not belonging to a conservative dynasty like DeMoss or Manion, nevertheless held a long association with the movement. A member of the college Young Republicans, Carbaugh worked in the Nixon White House at just twenty-three years old, and later moved to the staff of Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC), another icon of southern conservatism and one of Helms' strongest supporters in his 1972 Senate election campaign.⁵⁰ It was in Thurmond's office that Carbaugh met James P. Lucier,

⁴⁸ General works on the modern Christian Right include Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), Steve Bruce, "Modernity and Fundamentalism: The New Christian Right in America," *The British Journal of Sociology* 41, No. 4 (December, 1990): 477-496, and Gillian Peele, *Revival and Reaction: The Right in Contemporary America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). For the Christian Right's contribution to foreign policy, see Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of the Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012). The relationship between the religious right, conservatism, and the media is a focus for Heather Hendershot's *What's Fair on the Air: Cold War Right-Wing Broadcasting and the Public Interest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) and *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁴⁹ Among these figures was Carl McIntire, whose anti-communist campaigns are studied in Markku Ruotsila, "Carl McIntire and the Fundamentalist Origins of the Christian Right," *Church History* 81, No. 2 (June, 2012): 378-407, and Heather Hendershot, "God's Angriest Man: Carl McIntire, Cold War Fundamentalism, and Right-Wing Broadcasting," *American Quarterly* 59, No. 2 (June, 2007): 373-396.

⁵⁰ Kathy Sawyer, "Two Helms Point Men: Locking Horns with the Liberals," *Washington Post*, 27 November, 1979, A2, and Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 124. Strom Thurmond's role as the 'avatar' of the Republican Party's "Southern

a former literature teacher and journalist who had contributed to the hard-line, right wing John Birch Society in his early writings. Like Carbaugh, Lucier transferred to Helms' staff, running the senator's foreign policy staff. Lucier's tendency to provide, as Furgurson notes, the philosophical justifications and geographical specifics for Helms' more monochromatic judgements about world affairs made him a critical member of the senator's foreign policy staff.⁵¹

Helms' staff, however, were but one part of a wider, ever fluctuating and evolving, network of contacts that the senator cultivated across the United States and Central America. The senator had long been an energetic participant in political networks, constructing a large array of conservative contacts during his pre-Senate career.⁵² After his election to the Senate, and as his interest in foreign policy developed, Helms and his foreign policy aides moved within a broad, transnational network of policy allies that included many Central American conservatives who shared a commitment to rigid anti-communism, social traditionalism, and free-market enterprise. Though Helms portrayed the network in his memoir as a conduit for accurate information to use in his arguments back in the United States, it also provided a mechanism by which local conservative activists could connect with Helms and his staff in the pursuit of substantive policy change.⁵³

In this way, Helms' network had similarities with the transnational advocacy networks (TANs) that scholars have increasingly focused on as an

Strategy" is wonderfully illuminated in Joseph Crespino's *Strom Thurmond's America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

⁵¹ Furgurson, *Hard Right*, 192.

⁵² For an excellent overview of this network and its benefits for Helms, see Hardin, "Jesse Helms," 105-121.

⁵³ Helms wrote in his memoir that 'In order to prove my point, I had to have facts. The most reliable way to get those facts was to get them from trustworthy outside sources.' Helms, *Here's Where I Stand*, 208.

important element of late twentieth century international politics. TANs, as defined by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink in their influential *Activists Beyond Borders*, are ‘networks of activists, distinguishable largely by the centrality of principled ideas or values in motivating their formulation.’ They include ‘relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services.’⁵⁴ Scholarship has pointed to the importance of such networks in the final stages of the Cold War, with Mathew Evangelista providing a particularly compelling account of the contribution such networks made to the peaceful conclusion of the conflict.⁵⁵ Part of the growing wave of transnational histories that have emerged in the past thirty years, such studies offer greater insight into what Chris Bayly has termed the ‘interpenetration’ of ideas and resources.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 1-2. See also, Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), Ann M. Florini, ed., *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society* (Washington, D.C.: Japan Center for International Exchange and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), and Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁵⁵ Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁵⁶ C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *The American Historical Review* 111, No. 5 (December, 2006), 1442. For more on transnational history as a field of study, see Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, and J. T. Way, “Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis,” *American Quarterly* 60, No. 3, *Nation and Migration: Past and Future* (September, 2008): 625-648, Ian R. Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective Since 1789* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), Alan McPherson, *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles*, 111-139, and Ian Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” *The American Historical Review* 96, No. 4 (October, 1991): 1031-1055.

The effectiveness with which Helms integrated into these networks suggests the importance of expansive definitions of transnational networks. As Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink note, transnational networks have been defined in both restrictive and more open terms. Restrictive frameworks reject the inclusion of state actors, drawing only NGOs and social movements into these networks.⁵⁷ More expansive approaches, however, argue that while these groups are the primary driving force behind transnational collective action, some elements of state and international organisations, as well as think tanks, corporations, and domestic interest groups, should also be included.⁵⁸ The latter group, dubbed ‘mixed actor coalitions’, provides a more productive framework for Helms’ work.⁵⁹ In Central America, it was evident that anti-communist conservatives relied on Helms for access in Washington, just as he depended on their local influence. As such, it makes little sense to exclude him from the network process. Like Daniel C. Thomas’ suggestion that congressional actors represented a ‘network bastion’ in the American human rights movement of the 1970s, Helms was an integral component of later conservative networks.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ For an overview of the scholarship that restricts transnational networks to non-government actors, see Ann Florini’s *The Third Force*.

⁵⁸ Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink, “From Santiago to Seattle: Transnational Advocacy Groups Restructuring World Politics” in Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 9-10.

⁵⁹ For more on these groups, see Timothy M. Shaw, “Overview – Global/Local: States, Companies and Civil Societies at the End of the Twentieth Century,” in *Global Institutions and Local Empowerment: Competing Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Kendall Stiles (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000): 1-8.

⁶⁰ Daniel C. Thomas, “Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy,” in *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms*, eds. Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 76-78.

Briggs, McCormick, and Way have noted that transnationalism reveals the nation as ‘a thing contested, interrupted, and always shot through with contradiction.’⁶¹ Applying the framework to Helms’ initiatives allows us to perceive of his work as a product and cause of these contradictions. In doing so, it suggests that apparently nationalistic movements like Helms’ movement conservatism were capable of pursuing their agenda through transnational cooperation and advocacy.

More work is yet to be done on such transnational conservative networks. In their description of transnational civil society, Florini and Simmons’ describe its ‘currency’ as ‘credible information and moral authority’, not force.⁶² Given the overwhelming, almost exclusive, focus on transnational networks dedicated to liberal causes, scholars appear to have implicitly ignored the fact that credible information and moral righteousness were just as relevant to conservatives. What was the Cold War for conservatives, after all, if not a moral battle between a just, democratic west and a repressive, totalitarian communism? Moreover, as Helms’ network shows, information was no less relevant to conservatives looking to secure a change in norms within U.S. administrations they saw as too wrapped up in the mantras of containment and détente.

Nevertheless, while this project has sought to elaborate on Helms’ network, it has not provided a comprehensive overview of the connections the senator forged among Central American conservatives. The details of the reciprocal flows of information and influence are elusive, often closely protected by those who participated in such networks. As Rebecca Hersman notes in her own informative overview of the realities of the foreign policy process, informal power does not leave much of a paper

⁶¹ Briggs, McCormick, and Way, “Transnationalism,” 627.

⁶² Ann M. Florini and P. J. Simmons, “What the World Needs Now?” in *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society*, ed. Ann M. Florini (Washington, D.C.: Japan Center for International Exchange and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 11.

trail.⁶³ Tantalising examples of the power of Helms' network crop up throughout this work, and it is clear from the evidence available that the network was important to his activities in the period. However, judging the extent of the network is a task yet to be fully accomplished and only suggestions, not definitive conclusions, are offered about the role of these connections in Helms' foreign policy.

Such efforts were part of a much wider campaign of entrepreneurship, which Helms adopted as a means of gaining influence over policy. Different to congressional activism and assertiveness, entrepreneurship occurs when politicians take the initiative away from the executive branch.⁶⁴ This study takes Carter and Scott's definition of a policy entrepreneur as a framework, one where members of Congress 'seek to initiate action on the foreign policy issues about which they care rather than to await action from the administration.'⁶⁵ Such entrepreneurs look to either fill a policy vacuum or they seek to correct policy to their liking. In order to do so, they use a variety of means: legislation (e.g. drafting, introducing, co-sponsoring of bills and amendments), roll call votes, policy research, travel, hearings, public forum, articles, letters, meetings, etc.⁶⁶

⁶³ Rebecca K. C. Hersman, *Friends and Foes: How Congress and the President Really Make Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 8.

⁶⁴ Activism is defined as simply taking action on foreign policy issues, even if it is simply accepting an administration's request. Assertiveness is the pursuit of policy change by opposing or altering an administration's request. In both cases, the onus is on the administration to forge policy, before members of Congress make their impact.

⁶⁵ Ralph G. Carter and James M. Scott, *Choosing to Lead: Understanding Congressional Foreign Policy Entrepreneurs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 21-22.

⁶⁶ See David R. Mayhew, *America's Congress: Actions in the Public Sphere, James Madison through Newt Gingrich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), Kingdon, *Agendas*, and Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

For example, Helms used roll call votes as a means of shaping political narratives and defining friends and enemies. The senator dismissed the contextual nuances of votes, where a senator's preferences may not actually be reflected in their yea or nay vote. Instead, Helms construed votes as definitive and permanent expressions of policy preference. Those who voted for aid to Sandinista Nicaragua in 1979 were labelled pro-Sandinista throughout the 1980s, while senators who voted to ratify the Panama Canal Treaties were permanently described as capitulators to Third World blackmail. Such narratives became ingrained in the conservative press, where Helms' ability to put his colleagues in restrictive policy boxes helped movement conservatives identify both allies and adversaries over Central American policy. In doing so, Helms and conservatives replicated earlier liberal vote-monitoring efforts by such groups as Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), who had used congressional roll call votes as an instrument by which to assess legislators since the 1940s.

Helms' entrepreneurship should be placed within the context of a long-line of senatorial independence. Robert David Johnson's *Congress and the Cold War* astutely points out the historical role played by individual senators in articulating opposition to executive dominance of foreign policy. In the 1970s, it had been Steve Symington who had revolutionised the legislative challenge to the White House as a member of both the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Foreign Relations Committee, while other new institutionalists such as Ted Kennedy focused attention on human rights violations committed by U.S. allies like Chile and Turkey. Earlier, Claude Pepper had led congressional liberals in opposing the Truman Doctrine and its assistance for non-democratic regimes, such as Greece, in the aftermath of World War II. Even further back, to the early twentieth century, when Congress was pivotal in rejecting the League of Nations and forcing the Wilson administration to shelve its plans to deploy

troops in revolutionary Russia, individual lawmakers had mounted a significant challenge to the White House over America's role in the world.⁶⁷

Indeed, while Johnson sees such a historical line terminating in 1985 with the repeal of the Clark amendment – which prohibited assistance to anti-communist paramilitary groups in Angola since 1976 – Helms' record from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s indicates a degree of continuity. The senator's challenging of the Reagan and Bush administrations over their Central America policies, and his noticeable success in both Nicaragua and Panama, suggests in Helms there is a lengthier line of senatorial independents than Johnson credits.

Helms' entrepreneurship and his promotion of conservative foreign policy raise questions about the role of Congress in shaping Cold War foreign policy. It is a contentious issue among scholars. Much has been written supporting the view of an assertive post-Vietnam Congress, in which the imperial presidency was challenged – successfully – in the field of foreign policy. New Institutionalists of the 1980s and early 1990s pointed to the growing tendency for the legislative branch to exert control over the bureaucracy of foreign policy – for example, through reporting mechanisms and oversight procedures.⁶⁸ More recently, Johnson painted a picture of lawmakers intimately involved in the formation of foreign policy, helped by the growing influence of committee and subcommittee

⁶⁷ Robert David Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xv-xxi.

⁶⁸ For literature on new institutionalism, see James M. Lindsay, "Congress, Foreign Policy, and the New Institutionalism," *International Studies Quarterly* 38, No. 2 (June, 1994): 281-304, Randall L. Calvert, Mathew D. McCubbins and Barry R. Weingast, "A Theory of Political Control and Agency Discretion," *American Journal of Political Science* 33, No. 3 (August, 1989): 588-611, and Mathew D. McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz, "Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols versus Fire Alarms," *American Journal of Political Science* 28, No. 1 (February, 1984): 165-179.

chairpersons and ranking members who exerted substantial leverage through their control of hearings and legislative procedure.⁶⁹

On the other hand, there are those, most notably Barbara Hinckley, who see a foreign policy contest between executive and legislative branches as a myth, but one perpetuated by both sides because it is in their shared interest to appear active and engaged in debate. Hinckley sees both the press and the public as 'co-dependents' in this symbolic struggle, 'very willing consumers of this symbolism.'⁷⁰ Hinckley is especially critical of those who see a widely contested foreign policy agenda in the Reagan era, and blames the intense focus – by both Congress and the president – on disagreement over Nicaragua for giving the impression of a much wider debate. 'Ignoring the forest,' Hinckley argues, 'people gathered in fascination around one tree.'⁷¹ Yet even in Nicaragua, the consistent inability and unwillingness of apparently outraged oversight committees to effectively discipline the administration for bypassing the law in its secretive anti-Sandinista operations revealed the hollowness of this heated debate.

Helms' record is important because it straddles the bridge between these two conflicting perceptions of Congress and foreign policy after Vietnam. Certainly Helms faced many obstacles in imparting meaningful change on foreign policy, not least a long-term bureaucratic momentum in

⁶⁹ Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War*, xvii. One of the first to see a congressional activism over Latin America during the 1980s was Abraham Lowenthal, who noted aid to El Salvador, human rights certification, and licensing of Radio Martí were all indications of legislative influence. See Abraham F. Lowenthal, "Ronald Reagan and Latin America: Coping with Hegemony in Decline," *Eagle Defiant: United States Foreign Policy in the 1980s*, eds. Kenneth A. Oye, Robert J. Lieber, and Donald Rothchild (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983), 323.

⁷⁰ Barbara Hinckley, *Less Than Meets the Eye: Foreign Policy Making and the Myth of the Assertive Congress* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 193.

⁷¹ Hinckley, *Less Than Meets the Eye*, 153.

favour of several policy agendas in Central America.⁷² Nor was Helms emblematic of an endless stream of congressional entrepreneurs or institutional activists that consistently and successfully battled the executive. Carter and Scott find Helms is unique in their data analysis: the most prolific policy entrepreneur in the post-war period.⁷³ Hinckley is right to caution against drawing overly generalised conclusions from such distinctive examples.

Yet it is nevertheless the case that those who deny both the influence of individual legislators and a bolder Congress in the late Cold War ignore those, like Helms, who *did* successfully challenge the executive branch on its international agenda. The senator's use of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Western Hemisphere Subcommittee to frame particularly important matters pushed certain themes to the front of policy, and his network of contacts allowed a degree of independence from official accounts and administration-filtered reports. Working with congressional allies, friends spread throughout the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy, and partners across the western hemisphere, the senator took advantage of the fragmented nature of foreign policy-making to exert meaningful influence on many occasions. Rebecca Hersman has pointed out that 'policy is driven more by like-minded individuals than by disciplined organizations, conflict is as much intrainstitutional as it is interinstitutional, and issue loyalties often outweigh partisan ties or institutional allegiances.'⁷⁴ Helms' record is an important indicator of the accuracy of this assessment.

William Schneider, in assessing the first two years of the Reagan administration's international agenda, noted conservative activist Midge

⁷² For more on this idea of bureaucratic momentum, see Irvin Destler, Leslie Gelb, and Anthony Lake, *Our Own Worst Enemy: The Unmaking of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

⁷³ Carter and Scott, *Choosing to Lead*, 186.

⁷⁴ Hersman, *Friends and Foes*, 4.

Decter's early 1981 complaint that the president "seems to be pursuing the same old policy of détente... and I think if Reagan were not in office now, he'd be leading the opposition." Such a sentiment was 'inevitable', according to Schneider. Ideology, he claimed, rarely survives the challenge of actually governing.⁷⁵ The question for Helms, in his policies toward Central America, was whether he could sustain ideology, as modern American conservatism rose to power and the realities of government in the late Cold War.

Methodology and Sources

In researching Helms, Central America, and conservative foreign policy, several collections of source material were consulted. These included legislative and executive branch documentation, national daily newspapers, conservative periodicals, published autobiographical accounts, and several interviews – some conducted by the author, with others taken from oral history archives. Together, they illuminate Helms' record, not only as a foreign policy entrepreneur, but also as one of the multitude of competing voices of conservative foreign policy in the late Cold War.

Senator Helms was a prolific speaker in the Senate, and his comments on Central America's Cold War were frequent and extensive. As such, the richest historical record of his positions on foreign policy in the late Cold War are found in the *Congressional Record* and transcripts of congressional committee hearings in which Helms took part. For this thesis, using keyword searches and the *Record's* electronic index, every statement and item of legislation concerning El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Panama that Helms introduced was catalogued and examined. Relevant Senate

⁷⁵ William Schneider, "Conservatism, Not Interventionism: Trends in Foreign Policy Opinion, 1974-1982," in *Eagle Defiant: United States Foreign Policy in the 1980s*, eds. Kenneth A. Oye, Robert J. Lieber, and Donald Rothchild (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983), 33.

committee hearings, most notably those of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, were also consulted. Finally, Helms' responses to his colleagues' speeches and legislation pertinent to Central America were scrutinized. This built up a comprehensive overview of the senator's enduring attitudes to the region, as well as his more immediate responses to specific events. At the same time, given the fractured congressional landscape concerning foreign policy, it also revealed the contours of debate among conservatives in the Senate over the direction of the movement's foreign policy.

It is important to note that the *Congressional Record* – the daily account of the legislative branch's proceedings – is made available to lawmakers (and their staff) so that they may edit their remarks prior to publication the following day. Thus, the *Record* is by no means a verbatim transcript of Helms' views, or of congressional discussion more generally. While keeping this in mind, it is nevertheless the case that what is found in the *Record* can be regarded as the clearest statements of intent provided by Helms. Given his oft-expressed desire to construct a permanent record of his views on conservative foreign policy, the *Congressional Record* is the starting point for the reconstruction of that record.

Executive branch records were consulted at the Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush presidential libraries, as well as through the declassified collections made available by the *Digital National Security Archive*. Material at the presidential libraries permitted an insight into the relationships between Helms and government officials – whether employed at the White House itself, or the multitude of agencies involved in foreign policy – and helped to sketch out the networks within which the senator operated in the United States. It also highlighted Helms' more guarded insights into foreign policy and conservatives with whom he interacted over Central America, given that much of the correspondence between the senator and the executive branch was not aimed at public consumption at the time. Finally, given the propensity for grassroots conservative groups to

correspond with the White House, especially during the Reagan administration, reaction to the debate over the right's international agenda from among local, less high-profile conservative elements can be located in the presidential archives.

The *Digital National Security Archive*, which has individual collections of declassified U.S. government material relating to El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Iran-Contra, provided large quantities of the State Department cable traffic between officials in Central America and their colleagues in Washington D.C. Such correspondence was critical in ascertaining when, where, and how Helms – or those associated with him – impacted the work of government personnel on the ground. It also provided an insight into perceptions of the senator and his conservative allies among American officials and regional political elements. The networks of activists within which Helms worked are often difficult to lay out in concrete terms, but given that State Department officials on the ground in Central America were often the most likely to identify pro-Helms elements among local political, social, and economic groups, the lines between the senator and his allies in the region are made more tangible through examining these sources.

Major daily American national newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, were also consulted at length. These papers played a considerable role in uncovering many of the details of Central America policy in the period, not only because of their substantial resources in Washington D.C., but also because they dispatched correspondents to the region itself. In a region where American policy was often conducted under a cloak of secrecy, it was these reporters – many of whom received praise and awards for their reporting – who uncovered the often-clandestine details of U.S. policy. Furthermore, Helms' staff was adept at using the press to further their own goals, and, unlike the senator himself, often spoke candidly to reporters about the goals of conservative foreign policy and the methods they used in pursuit of those goals. Finally,

in the battle between conservatives over their international agenda, especially during the Reagan administration, leaks to the press were regarded by many in the highest levels of politics as an effective method for gaining an upper hand over policy rivals. Intra-conservative dissent was often played out in the pages of the American national media.

A number of specifically conservative media collections were also examined. The two principle collections were *Human Events* and *National Review*. These two publications, as the dominant conservative media institutions of the period, were critical in assessing how conservatives consumed and transmitted their ideas and policy suggestions. They brought together key intellectual and political leaders among the right and provided a platform for their views, while also offering grassroots conservatives an opportunity to express their opinions through letters' pages. Indeed, conservative periodicals were specifically chosen because they helped illuminate the extent to which Helms' attitudes resonated with conservatives outside the high-political groups he often associated with.

Several interviews were conducted for this project. Those interviewed included members of Congress from the period, executive branch officials, and congressional staffers. Other requests for interviews, including those sent to Senator Helms' aides, were politely declined or not returned. Those interviewed were generous with their time and knowledge, but often, owing to the years that have passed, specific details about Helms or policy were not always readily forthcoming. Nevertheless, the material gathered provided specific details in several instances and, more generally, was incredibly useful as background context for the project. The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training oral history collection was used more extensively, given its rich first-hand accounts of foreign policy decision-making and implementation. These oral histories were invaluable in piecing together the network of contacts that operated in pursuit of conservative policy, as many members of these groups –

including several close associates of Helms – were interviewed as part of the association’s project.

Finally, it must be noted that material contained at the Jesse Helms Center in Wingate, North Carolina, was unavailable during the research window for this thesis. The reorganisation of the senator’s papers that the Helms Center has undertaken will no doubt prove highly beneficial to future scholars of Helms, North Carolina politics, and modern conservatism. For this thesis, however, access to the Helms Center’s papers was not critical. Consultation with those who have examined the archives in the past revealed that foreign policy material was not especially prevalent among the collections available. Moreover, the range of other available sources meant that building up a picture of Helms’ worldview, his policy influence, and his relationships with other policy actors was possible without the Helms Center archives. This is not to say that accessing the senator’s papers would not have been helpful or interesting, but the breadth and depth of the aforementioned collections made up for this lack of access to the senator’s personal papers.

Ultimately, the sources outlined here reflect the circles within which Helms worked in pursuit of his goals. They are predominantly concerned with “high” or “elite” level politics because this is the arena in which Helms tended to work most publicly – whether attempting to influence how policy was articulated or how it was actually implemented. Where Helms and his associated worked less openly, such as in the network of contacts spread across Central America, the ties that bound these conservatives were more informal, and have appeared to produce little as a documentary trail.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is split into five chapters, covering El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Panama between the 1970s and early 1990s. Though each can be seen as a specific case study in conservative foreign policy agendas and

congressional entrepreneurship, they are designed to be read together. Critical themes of Helms' conservative foreign policy – democracy promotion, free-market solutions, militarised anti-communism, opposition to drug trafficking – permeate all, with such linkages reinforced by the transnational nature of Central American conflict in these years. Taken together, they are intended to demonstrate the consistency of the senator's foreign policy ideology – even as his tactics evolved as the United States transitioned to a post-Cold War environment.

Chapter one examines Jesse Helms' first point of contact with Central America: Panama, and, specifically, the Panama Canal Treaties. It illustrates how, between his swearing in as a senator in 1973 and the ratification of the Carter-Torrijos agreements in 1978, Helms helped mould and sustain a conservative opposition dedicated to rejecting any transfer of the waterway to the Panamanian government. In doing so, the senator revealed the tensions among Republicans and conservatives over how to approach international affairs in the 1970s, as both presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford both committed the United States to new Canal treaties and a wider détente strategy.

Chapter two focuses on Helms and Nicaragua in the years 1979 to 1985. It suggests that the Reagan Doctrine owed its existence in this country to the work of a small, secretive network of conservative activists spread throughout the hemisphere that had begun to develop both a framing narrative and instruments of implementation before Ronald Reagan set foot in the White House. Helms and his staff formed an important part of this network, building early momentum for the Contra campaign that ultimately defined the Reagan administration's Nicaragua policy.

Chapter three looks at the senator's engagement with El Salvador, from the breakdown of the country's military junta in 1979 to the United Nations-brokered peace accords in the early 1990s. It indicates that

conservative unity over Central America, seen in the widespread support for the Contras in Nicaragua and opposition to the Panama Canal Treaties, did not tell the whole story. Movement conservatives, led by Helms, openly broke with President Reagan over the war in El Salvador. Despite this, at various times, Helms' relationship with the Salvadoran right was useful to the Reagan administration in exerting pressure on those who threatened to escalate the country's already bitter conflict.

Chapter four returns to Nicaragua, looking at how the senator coped with the dramatic collapse of Contra policy in the wake of the Iran-Contra scandals, the Esquipulas peace accords, and the 1990 election defeat for the Sandinistas. After 1986, Helms and movement conservatives found themselves progressively marginalised as momentum increased behind the regional peace process. As with El Salvador, this period reveals strains in the conservative movement's relationship with the Reagan administration, as the president reluctantly embraced the Esquipulas peace process. This chapter also highlights the endurance of conservative Cold War foreign policy thinking, as Helms maintained – and reinvigorated – his opposition to the Sandinistas in the aftermath of their 1990 election defeat.

Chapter five also returns to a previously-examined location, this time Panama. Focusing on the period in which Manuel Noriega occupied power in that country, the chapter suggests that Helms was capable of collaborative politics, even with those with whom he had profound political disagreements. It outlines the manner in which Helms drew upon the threat of international drug trafficking and the United States' growing commitment to democracy promotion in order to construct an anti-Noriega coalition in the Senate that spanned the ideological spectrum. However, Helms never deviated from a conservative framework for opposing Noriega, and the issue of the Panama Canal Treaties lingered in the background, behind his broader criticisms of both the Reagan and Bush administrations. While many saw Operation Just Cause and the removal of Noriega as a post-Cold War intervention, Helms and the movement

conservative community celebrated the invasion of Panama as a definitive Cold War victory.

The thesis concludes with an overview of Helms' policies in Central America, and suggests directions for future research. In doing so it will summarise why, to conservatives, Helms' foreign policies made him 'the most important conservative of the last 25 years' alongside Ronald Reagan, but why his adversaries believed the senator 'did more harm to America's national security than any other member of government in the 20th century.'⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Fred Barnes, "The Ascendency of Jesse Helms," *Weekly Standard*, 11 August, 1997, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Protected/Articles/000/000/008/585mqmat.asp>, accessed, 22 June, 2014, and author's correspondence with Robert Pastor, March, 2012.

Panama, 1972-1981

'There is no one in the Senate who has worked harder or done more against giving away this canal than the able Senator from North Carolina (Mr. HELMS).' – Sen. Strom Thurmond, 7 March, 1978.⁷⁷

That Panama, and the Canal that runs through it, dominated Jesse Helms' first foray into Central America policy in the 1970s was not a surprise. The 1977 Panama Canal Treaties, signed by President Jimmy Carter and General Omar Torrijos, Panama's charismatic *caudillo* leader, were a watershed moment in the rise of the post-war right. The agreements – one guaranteeing the neutrality of the waterway, and the right of the United States to defend that neutrality, and a second declaring that Panama would take control of the Canal at the end of 1999 – invigorated the conservative community as its members mounted an all-out campaign to prevent what they considered to be the surrender of one of the United States' most treasured, and most strategically important, possessions.

It is widely argued in scholarship on the post-war right, and on the Panama Canal Treaties themselves, that the critical stage of this mobilisation occurred during 1977 and 1978, when conservatives sought to persuade senators to block ratification of the treaties as part of a wider assault on Carter's moralistic reordering of American policy abroad.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Strom Thurmond (SC), "Treaty Concerning The Permanent Neutrality And Operation Of The Panama Canal," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 5779.

⁷⁸ The ratification debate takes centre stage in Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy*, 278-280, Adam Clymer, *Drawing the Line at the Big Ditch: The Panama Canal Treaties and the Rise of the Right* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), David Skidmore, "Foreign Policy Interest Groups and Presidential Power: Jimmy Carter and the Battle over Ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 23, No. 3, The Domestic and Foreign Policy Presidencies (Summer, 1993): 477-497, Robert A. Strong, "Jimmy Carter and the Panama Canal Treaties,"

Laura Kalman, who recognised longer-term factors behind the rise of the right in this period, still tends only to look back to the bitter intra-Republican struggle between supporters of President Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan during the fight to secure the party's presidential nomination in 1975 and 1976.⁷⁹ This chapter argues that Helms' opposition to the Panama Canal Treaties, which began almost as soon as he entered the Senate in January 1973, underscores longer-term foundations to this chauvinistic conservative foreign policy vision toward Panama and the world. Rather than emerging as a response to Jimmy Carter's moralistic human rights international agenda of the late 1970s, it developed in dissent over Republican détente under Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger.

Yet as much as the Panama Canal Treaties were a contest between competing contemporary international agendas, there was also a battle over history. At the heart of the anti-Treaties movement, from its first-wave manifestation right through to third-wave anti-ratification, was a desire among conservatives to protect an exceptionalist narrative of American benevolence in Panama. It was based upon the actions and legacy of President Theodore Roosevelt, whose role in the origins of the Canal was lauded as the epitome of America's generosity and determined strength. This Rooseveltian hagiography was critical to Helms' idea of what the Canal meant to the United States, but also how the country should face the post-Vietnam world.

It was this Rooseveltian narrative of American exceptionalism in the Isthmus that Helms and many conservatives took to heart in their understanding of the Canal and the Zone. These were not simply 'bricks-

Presidential Studies Quarterly 21, No. 2, Measures of the President: Hoover to Bush (Spring, 1991): 269-286, and George D. Moffett III, *The Limits of Victory: The Ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁷⁹ Laura Kalman, *Right Star Rising: A New Politics, 1974-1980* (New York: London, 2010), 167.

and-mortar' strategic assets that were integral to hemispheric and global security considerations in the Cold War: there was an emotional resonance to the story of the Canal that provided a foundation upon which the efforts against the agreements were built. Helms' fight over the treaties was not only about America's current and future power; it was a battle to preserve the United States' glorious past, and an echo of Roosevelt's own campaign to defend the nation's actions in the Isthmus.

Not all conservatives attached themselves to this narrative, just as not all conservatives were against the treaties. In an early indication of the kind of splits that would develop among the right during the Reagan administration, prominent members of the conservative community, including William F. Buckley, Jr. and James Burnham, argued that the treaties served the United States' evolving national security goals.⁸⁰ Several Republicans in the Ford administration, including that president and Henry Kissinger, were also willing to sign off on the treaties in pursuit of stability.⁸¹ The contest between pragmatism and principle among the post-war right that had surfaced with respect to Vietnam, China, and Soviet policy reared its head in Panama too.

Helms' record sheds light on those who made up the core of the anti-Treaties movement, not only in the Senate but also among conservative grassroots activists and media organs. He operated within a cohesive, recognisable congressional anti-Treaties lobby, and enjoyed the support – and in turn supported – a distinctive group of non-congressional conservative actors. It was largely, as Furgurson notes, a 'routine, above board' political strategy for Helms – dependent upon making his case in

⁸⁰ See James Burnham, "Panama or Taiwan?" *National Review*, 16 September, 1977, 1043, and William F. Buckley Jr., "And Finally on Panama," *National Review*, 12 November, 1976, 1252-1253.

⁸¹ Strong, "Jimmy Carter and the Panama Canal Treaties," 276.

Senate speeches and campaign rhetoric.⁸² At times, though, foreshadowing the years to come, the senator employed less predictable, or at least less public, measures that were designed to shore up support among conservatives, and Republicans more widely, for the anti-Treaties message. The Panama Canal Treaties thus became as much a battle for the soul of the GOP and modern conservatism, as well as for control of the national foreign policy agenda.

The Canal and First Wave Opposition, 1972-1975

When Jesse Helms was sworn in as a senator in January 1973, the United States had already made significant steps toward renegotiating the original 1903 agreement governing its control of the Canal. Lyndon Johnson's administration, conscious of intensifying instability in the Canal Zone and committed to alleviating social and economic inequality there, formulated a new framework for treaties. In 1967, the U.S. agreed three draft treaties with Panama that laid the foundations for a more equitable share of toll revenues and, critically, the transfer of sovereignty in the Zone on a specific date.

It was not an altogether surprising decision. Momentum had slowly accumulated in the post-war era for a reconsideration of Panama policy, as successive U.S. administrations recognised a new and improved relationship with Panama would satisfy both bilateral and global strategic imperatives. American officials wanted to reduce tensions that were threatening the security of the waterway. At the same time, they also recognised that showing empathy for the concerns of a developing (and non-aligned) nation would be beneficial within a wider Cold War context. A "hearts and minds" strategy, they envisioned, would encourage Panama to shift its allegiance toward the West, and, in doing so, potentially persuade other developing nations to do the same.

⁸² Fergurson, *Hard Right*, 194.

Though congressional discontent, led by the inveterate Cold Warrior and Pennsylvania congressman Daniel J. Flood (D-PA), doomed Johnson's efforts, the draft treaties nevertheless signified a new stage in the renegotiating of sovereignty by the executive branch. President Nixon, preoccupied with Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and China, accepted his predecessor's strategy, and he and Henry Kissinger saw the proposed deal as a logical addition to détente. Cognisant of the limits of American power in a post-Vietnam and increasingly multi-polar world, they were convinced that the key to maintaining international influence was to reduce foreign military operations and secure strategic agreements with enemy states.⁸³ Détente allowed for a more nuanced foreign policy and greater opportunities for dialogue aimed at securing a stable international system.⁸⁴ New Panama Canal agreements would promote this stability on the United States' doorstep.

However, both Nixon and Kissinger were unwilling to relinquish control of the waterway for a minimum of fifty years. With such a position incompatible with General Torrijos' definitive, and symbolic, deadline of 2003, one hundred years after the original treaty was signed, negotiations faltered and both sides retreated into seemingly intractable positions.⁸⁵ Senior White House staff ordered a new look at Panama policy in late 1972, but this was largely a low-level exploratory initiative, and when Helms was

⁸³ Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy*, 238-239.

⁸⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 279.

⁸⁵ Clymer, *Drawing the Line*, 8, Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine, 1945 - 1993* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 147, and Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 180.

sworn in at the start of the New Year, the chances for new agreements appeared remote.⁸⁶

The existing opposition to new treaties had involved congressional elites like Flood and South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC), but it was the conservative periodical *Human Events* around which first-wave opponents had coalesced. The magazine was first published in 1944 by Henry Regnery, a World War II isolationist who had joined the anti-interventionist America First Committee before its disbandment after Pearl Harbor, and who later built up an eponymous publishing company specialising in conservative literature. The company published William Buckley's *God and Man at Yale* and Russell Kirk's *A Conservative Mind*, two of the most important works of modern conservatism. By the late 1950s, *Human Events* and other Regnery publications, along with *National Review* and the Manion Forum, formed the hub of post-war American conservatism.⁸⁷ *Human Events*, for its part, played a critical role in helping to organise the modern mass conservative movement; having, as Nicole Hemmer points out, 'created, backed, promoted, and evaluated organizations' during these formative years.⁸⁸

On Panama, *Human Events* was a focal point for first-wave opposition.⁸⁹ Regular contributors to its commentary on the Canal in the

⁸⁶ William J. Jordan, *Panama Odyssey* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 184.

⁸⁷ Nicole Hemmer, "Messengers of the Right: Media and the Modern Conservative Movement," (Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 2010), 109.

⁸⁸ Hemmer, "Messengers of the Right," 119.

⁸⁹ For examples, see Strom Thurmond, "New Panama Treaty Talks?" *Human Events*, 15 November, 1969, 22, James Jackson Kilpatrick, "Why Should the U.S. Yield Canal Sovereignty?" *Human Events*, 12 August, 1967, 7, Durward Hall, "Canal Giveaway," *Human Events*, 22 July, 1967, 15, Donald Marquand Dozer, "Abandonment of Panama Canal Would Solve No Problem," *Human Events*, 9 October, 1965, 2, and "The Connolly Reservation Must Stand," *Human Events*, 1 September, 1960, 392.

1960s included congressional opinion-leaders like Strom Thurmond and Daniel Flood, while Tom Winter, the magazine's editor, subsequently helped lead the New Right's intense anti-ratification initiatives.⁹⁰ Professor Donald M. Dozer, a Latin America specialist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, became a frequent writer for the magazine from the 1960s onwards, and he later participated as one of many hostile conservative witnesses at congressional hearings into the Carter-Torrijos agreements.⁹¹

In short, conservative concern with the Canal was clearly far from a new phenomenon in the 1970s. While it would gain far greater prominence as the decade went on, conservative oppositionism had its roots in the movement's core in the aftermath of World War II. Buttressing this faction was the work of foreign policy nationalists, like Flood. An 'independent-minded' Democrat, according to biographer William C. Kashatus, Flood's staunchly chauvinistic foreign policy vision on Panama meshed with that of the growing modern conservative community.⁹² Indeed, so prominent was Flood's position in first-wave opposition, he was labelled "Public Enemy No. 1" by Panamanians.⁹³

⁹⁰ Clymer, *Drawing the Line*, 54, and Adam Clymer, "Conservatives Map Drive Against the Canal Treaty," *The New York Times*, 16 August, 1977, 7.

⁹¹ Donald Marquand Dozer, "Abandonment of Panama Canal Would Solve No Problem," 2. Dozer, along with a close acquaintance of Helms, Professor Lewis Tambs of Arizona State University, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as part of a panel of noted Latin America specialists. U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations. *Panama Canal Treaties Part 3: Public Witnesses*, 10-12, 14, October and 13 October, 1978, 117-200.

⁹² William C. Kashatus, *Dapper Dan Flood: The Controversial Life of a Congressional Power Broker* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 5.

⁹³ Flood's Panama policies are examined in detail in Kashatus, *Dapper Dan Flood*, 229 and Sheldon Spear, *Daniel J. Flood: A Biography – The Congressional Career of an Economic Savior and Cold War Nationalist* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2008), 36.

When Helms started to become actively involved in Canal policy it was as part of this already relatively well-developed community with long-standing concerns. Six months into his Senate career, on 19 July 1973, Helms echoed their concerns in his first floor speech on events in the Isthmus. Joining conservative colleagues Harry F. Byrd, Jr. (I-VA), Strom Thurmond (R-SC), James Buckley (C-NY), Clifford Hansen (R-WY), and Ernest Hollings (D-SC) in their condemnation of negotiations with Panama, Helms set out the fundamental principles of his opposition to the new treaties based on both historical and contemporary justifications of the Canal's importance to the nation. These were the defence of U.S. sovereignty in the Zone, a Rooseveltian narrative of the Canal's construction, congressional assertiveness, economic concerns, and national security imperatives.⁹⁴

On the first of these issues – the defence of sovereignty – Helms told his assembled colleagues that he was ‘distressed’ at the continuation of negotiations based upon the Johnson principles that advocated ‘the surrender of U.S. sovereignty in the zone’. As far as the senator was concerned, the Panama Canal Zone was ‘virtually territory of the United States. We have exercise [sic] jurisdiction there. We have set up laws there. Congress has treated the Canal Zone as territory.’ Linking this to a declaration of congressional authority – a tactic he frequently resorted to when challenging policies he didn’t agree with – Helms condemned the Department of State for failing to consult with the legislature about efforts to cede sovereignty that Congress had acquired. As such, Helms concluded, ‘the negotiations are unauthorized.’⁹⁵

This first-wave oppositionist claim as to the sovereign rights of the United States was questionable, given the peculiar language of the original

⁹⁴ Jesse Helms (NC), “The Future Of The Panama Canal,” *Cong. Rec.* 119 (1973), 24751.

⁹⁵ Helms, “The Future of the Panama Canal,” *Cong. Rec.* 119 (1973), 24751.

treaty that allocated the United States powers *as if* it were sovereign, but not as the sovereign power.⁹⁶ Some first-wave oppositionists recognised this, but denied its relevance. Flood claimed in a 1957 *World Affairs* article that the 1903 treaty had given the nation powers as if it were sovereign while maintaining that this equated to sovereignty itself.⁹⁷ It is possible that Helms understood the complexities of this issue, given his reference to the Zone as ‘*virtually* territory of the United States’ [author’s italics]. As time went on, however, both the senator and his conservative oppositionist allies would offer more definitive claims of sovereignty.

Helms also joined his colleagues in linking the negotiations to contemporary international affairs. ‘The United States cannot continue to pull back from every area of the world’, the senator argued. It was one thing to withdraw from Southeast Asia, a venture the senator had disagreed with to begin with, but quite another to retreat from the Panama Canal Zone. Indeed, the distractions of recent months, Helms argued, should not divert Americans from ‘the fact that the Panama Canal plays a key role in our national defense and international commerce.’⁹⁸ It was an implicit jab at Nixon and Kissinger’s agenda, as the two orchestrated a retreat from Vietnam and outreach to China and the Soviet Union.

Noticeably, Helms appealed to history in his remarks. ‘The canal is an historic American achievement,’ the senator stated, ‘both in its construction and its operations. It is unique in history for a nation to have such an

⁹⁶ David McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 393, and LaFeber, *Panama Canal*, 217-220.

⁹⁷ Daniel J. Flood, “Panama Canal Zone: Constitutional Domain of the United States,” *World Affairs* 121, No. 3 (Fall, 1958): 74-77.

⁹⁸ Sandra Scanlon has pointed to the splits within the conservative movement over the withdrawal from Vietnam. While the movement largely supported President Nixon’s bombing campaign, Vietnamisation was disputed on the right. Scanlon, “The Conservative Lobby,” 255 – 276.

accomplishment.⁹⁹ Such comments repeated existing first-wave arguments that had used history as a defence of U.S. sovereignty and control, but from now on, Helms would be one of the most prominent and frequent articulators of this Rooseveltian narrative of U.S.-Panamanian relations.¹⁰⁰ The story depicted the Canal's origins and decades of subsequent U.S. control as prominent examples of the nation's benevolence and exceptionalism, as part of what Hogan describes as 'a version of history that most Americans *wished* to believe'.¹⁰¹ It was drawn directly from the ideals of Theodore Roosevelt, who had constructed a glorious record of his achievements in the Isthmus as a justification for his actions there at the turn of the century.¹⁰²

Roosevelt was enormously proud, and utterly unrepentant, about his conduct during the acquisition of the Panama Canal. 'By far the most important action I took in foreign affairs during the time I was President,' he stated in his autobiography, 'related to the Panama Canal.' His justifications for these policies in the Isthmus following from two interrelated issues: a rejection of Colombian sovereignty and, simultaneously, a desire to promote U.S. power. In order to satisfy the first requirement, the president publicly attacked Colombia's record as a stable democratic government. He noted that for fifty-three years prior to the

⁹⁹ Helms, "The Future of the Panama Canal," *Cong. Rec.* 119 (1973), 24751.

¹⁰⁰ William L. Furlong and Margaret E. Scranton, *The Dynamics of Foreign Policymaking: the President, the Congress, and the Panama Canal Treaties* (Boulder: Westview, 1984), 135-136.

¹⁰¹ Hogan, *The Panama Canal*, 137. Hogan offers an excellent overview of the contest between histories, in *The Panama Canal*, 135-156.

¹⁰² For more detailed accounts of the origins of the Panama Canal, see John Major, *Prize Possession: The United States and the Panama Canal, 1903 – 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas*. There are also useful introductions to Roosevelt's strategy in LaFeber, *Panama Canal*, and J. Michael Hogan, *The Panama Canal in American Politics: Domestic Advocacy and the Evolution of Policy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986).

1903 treaty, Colombia (and its predecessor New Granada) had been ‘in a constant state of flux’ owing to multiple ‘disturbances’. The frequency and intensity of these ‘revolutions, rebellions, insurrections, riots, and other outbreaks’ had only gotten worse as the twentieth century began and as a result, according to Roosevelt, Colombia had proven itself completely unable to keep order in the region. Roosevelt also noted that Colombia was in the hands of ‘an irresponsible alien dictator’. In questioning the legitimacy of the Colombian government and its ability to maintain peace in the Isthmus, Roosevelt explicitly rejected its right to control the Canal.¹⁰³

To explain the projection of U.S. power over the Isthmus, Roosevelt relied upon two justifications: historical precedent and the United States’ civilising mission. In the case of the former, the president noted that between 1856 and 1902, U.S. troops had been forced to land upon the Isthmus a total of six times in order to protect the lives and the property of its inhabitants.¹⁰⁴ In intervening in the present crisis that threatened the canal, the U.S. was simply continuing in a long tradition of peacekeeping. The second explanation was stated less equivocally, but in Roosevelt’s actions one could discern the consequences of his 1899 assertion that ‘Every expansion of a great civilized power means a victory for law, order, and righteousness.’¹⁰⁵ If Colombia could not be trusted to control the Canal and protect the people of the area, it was only natural that the United States should assume that responsibility. The result would surely be a more stable, more prosperous and ultimately more civilised Isthmus.

Roosevelt’s dispatch of gunboats to the Panama coast and landing of American troops on the Isthmus was therefore in line with his corollary to

¹⁰³ Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1929), 512 – 519.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 517.

¹⁰⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2009), 14.

the Monroe Doctrine, which stated that the U.S. had the right to intervene in the internal affairs of a Latin American nation in the event of instability and turmoil.¹⁰⁶ Though there is debate over whether the Roosevelt Corollary constituted a limitation of U.S. influence in the region or the logical extension of the president's Big Stick foreign policy philosophy, the result in this case was to generate an atmosphere in which the U.S. could acquire the Canal with as little trouble as possible.¹⁰⁷ Undermining Colombia in the canal negotiations by supporting the Panamanian rebels provided Roosevelt with the result he desired – a cross-Isthmus waterway that not only secured the economic benefits of safe passage for American vessels, but which contributed significantly to the national security of the United States and its international prestige in an era of great power rivalry.

These rousing justifications for U.S. involvement in the Isthmus were further bolstered by Roosevelt's stirring praise for the American engineers and labourers who subsequently completed the construction of the Panama Canal. These individuals should be treated as victorious soldiers, the president later commented, and he praised the work of American doctors for their efforts to rid Panama of a myriad of tropical diseases.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, Roosevelt proclaimed, the actions of these Americans – and therefore, by close connection, his own actions – had made the world a better place: 'they have made not only America but the whole world their debtors by what they have accomplished.'¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ LaFeber, *Panama Canal*, 44.

¹⁰⁷ See Richard H. Collin, *Theodore Roosevelt's Caribbean: The Panama Canal, the Monroe Doctrine, and the Latin American Context* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990) for a sympathetic analysis of the president's policy in the region, and Serge Ricard, "The Roosevelt Corollary," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, No. 1, Presidential Doctrines (March, 2006) for a stinging criticism of Roosevelt's Corollary and its intentions.

¹⁰⁸ Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, 528.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 529.

The essential themes of Roosevelt's account would permeate Helms' commentary on the Canal over the coming years. In his appeals to protect U.S. sovereignty and project American strength, and in his denigration of Panamanian power and stability, the senator would implicitly re-animate Roosevelt's own words for a new era. Helms would also be one of the most passionate defenders of that president's conduct when advocates of new treaties suggested America's actions at the start of the twentieth century were deceitful and a cause for current tensions in the Isthmus.

Just as important as the substance of Helms' first Senate Canal speech was its timing. The senator entered the debate over Panama policy in July, in the wake of two critical events. The first was a special meeting of the United Nations Security Council in Panama in March. Torrijos, frustrated by the Nixon administration's intransigence, had sought to internationalise the Canal issue as a means of forcing the United States to re-engage with the talks.¹¹⁰ Before the court of world opinion, Panamanian diplomats condemned the U.S. as a colonial and imperial oppressor, and pleaded with the international community for support.

Angered by the Panamanian rhetoric, American officials vetoed a strongly supported U.N. resolution in favour of the Panamanian position on the Canal.¹¹¹ Diplomats and political observers feared Panama's strategy had damaged already fragile congressional sympathies for any new treaties.¹¹² The second, linked to the U.N. meeting, was press speculation that veteran diplomat and former ambassador to South Vietnam Ellsworth

¹¹⁰ Moffett III, *Limits of Victory*, 38,

¹¹¹ Thirteen member states voted in favour of the resolution, with only Britain abstaining. Richard Severos, "U.S. in U.N. Council Vetoes Panama Canal Resolution," *The New York Times*, 22 March, 1973, 1.

¹¹² Frank Blatchford, "Costly Propaganda Triumph?: U.S. Senate backlash seen on Panama Canal treaty," *Chicago Tribune*, 25 March, 1973, 40, and "Futility in Panama," *The New York Times*, 24 March, 1973, 32.

Bunker was about to be named chief negotiator for the United States.¹¹³ Anti-Treaties campaigners feared that the appointment would commit the United States to a fresh effort at breaking the negotiating deadlock.¹¹⁴

Looking back from 1978, Walter LaFeber deemed the furore at the United Nations the 'nadir' in relations between the U.S. and Panama.¹¹⁵ However, as scholarship on the treaties has noted, Torrijos' gambit paid off, forcing Henry Kissinger to reevaluate U.S. policy.¹¹⁶ William Jordan, the Department of State's lead official on the negotiations and soon to be named ambassador to Panama, recognised the U.N. meeting was a tipping point. Where previously the Secretary of State had been preoccupied with Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union, he now recognised the potential for an outburst of violence in the nation's own backyard.¹¹⁷ Bunker's appointment was designed to restart the stalled negotiations, and head off any potential instability in Panama.

Helms' decision to hold back until rumours of Bunker's appointment surfaced highlighted a recurring theme in the senator's approach to Central American policy. While he could be proactive in driving an issue to the centre of congressional and national attention, he was also astute in capitalising on windows of opportunity that other actors created. While such windows are often predictable – Kingdon cites the scheduled renewal

¹¹³ "Capital Briefs," *Human Events*, 14 July, 1973, 2, and "Bunker Is Expected to Get Panama-Negotiations Post," *The New York Times*, 30 June, 1973, 14.

¹¹⁴ Harry Byrd Jr., leading the senators' colloquy, referred to the media reports in his opening comments. Harry F. Byrd Jr. (I-VA), "The Future Of The Panama Canal," *Cong. Rec.* 119 (1973), 24746.

¹¹⁵ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 180.

¹¹⁶ Major, *Prize Possession*, 342, Moffett III, *Limits of Victory*, 38, Furlong and Scranton, *The Dynamics of Foreign Policymaking*, 34, and Jordan, *Panama Odyssey*, 197.

¹¹⁷ Jordan, *Panama Odyssey*, 197.

of a programme as an example – they can just as easily be unforeseen.¹¹⁸ The U.N. meeting and subsequent speculation about Bunker's role were an unexpected but timely opportunity for Helms and congressional first-wave opposition leaders to speak out about their concerns in light of the intensifying attention paid to the Canal.

Gradually the senator linked Panama to the détente strategy that Helms and conservatives so vigorously opposed. On 3 May, in remarks explaining the move toward negotiations in the aftermath of the U.N. meeting, Nixon told Congress that Panama policy would now be a part of détente:

The world has changed radically during the 70 years this treaty has been in effect. Latin America has changed. Panama has changed. And the terms of our relationship should reflect those changes in a reasonable way.¹¹⁹

In doing so, the president signalled to the American people that sovereignty and control in the Zone was no longer the shibboleth it had once been. Growing conservative activism on Panama was thus not simply a reflection of the perception of a shifting relationship between the United States and Panama, but also a consequence of unease at the inclusion of Isthmus policy in the larger re-orientation of the nation's global security strategy.

As well as speaking out in Congress, Helms was the sole co-sponsor of Strom Thurmond's proposal for renewed investment in the Canal. Development, oppositionists expected, would undercut both the political and economic case for constitutional reform. In the New Year, Helms wrote to Bunker privately to assert his opposition to any compromise over U.S. sovereignty. The correspondence subsequently made its way onto the

¹¹⁸ Kingdon, *Agendas*, 165.

¹¹⁹ Jorden, *Panama Odyssey*, 199.

pages of *Human Events*.¹²⁰ And, in March and again a year later, he sponsored the so-called Thurmond Resolutions, which expressed majority Senate support for continuing US sovereignty in the Zone.¹²¹ Scholarship on Panama policy quite rightly notes that the 1974 Thurmond resolution marked a critical acceleration of efforts to oppose the negotiations. For the first time, enough senators had recorded opposition to the negotiations to prevent their ratification.¹²² The second Thurmond resolution, a year later and with more signatures than the 1974 version, showed that there was now a significant constituency in the Senate for congressional assertiveness over Panama policy.¹²³

On a bilateral level, Helms' support for the Thurmond resolutions was based on Helms' resistance to any deviation in the relationship between the two nations as set out in the original 1903 treaty. It also signalled an expanded commitment to the sovereignty argument, as mention of 'virtual' sovereignty disappeared from the senator's message. Yet Helms' sponsorship of the Thurmond legislation had a wider resonance, because it complemented his increasingly venomous criticism of Henry Kissinger's international diplomacy. Panama policy was but one example of Kissingerian policies which 'gives us a paper peace and disguises the real power relationship in the world', Helms said, as part of his growing

¹²⁰ "Bunker Confirms 'Loss' of Canal Sovereignty," *Human Events*, 26 January, 1974, 4.

¹²¹ "S. Res. 301: Resolution relating to jurisdiction over the U.S. owned Canal Zone on the Isthmus of Panama," *Cong. Rec.* 120 (1974), 8832-8847. The resolution's importance was picked up by at least two of the major daily papers: "32 Senators Back Resolution Opposing Panama Canal Pact," *The New York Times*, 30 March, 1974, 3, "31 Senators Support U.S. Canal Role," *Washington Post*, 30 March, 1974, A4. In the conservative press, Thurmond was credited with leading the fight. "Thurmond Leads Fight For Canal Sovereignty," *Human Events*, 13 April, 1974, 4.

¹²² Clymer, *Drawing the Line*, 9, Hogan, *Panama Canal*, 85, LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 185-186, and Moffett III, *The Limits of Victory*, 42.

¹²³ "S. Res. 97: A resolution urging retention of undiluted U.S. sovereignty over the canal zone," *Cong. Rec.* 121 (1975), 5070.

criticism of the Secretary of State and the détente to which Kissinger was pursuing.¹²⁴

If Helms was not being credited with overall leadership of the anti-Treaties lobby by commentators at the time, then he was at the very least contributing to themes that would pervade – cynics might say saturate – the debate for the next three years. Helms criticised Panama for resorting to threats and intimidation. He blamed the Department of State for encouraging this behaviour, and rebuked the department for failing to consult Congress about its policy toward the Canal. Just as Thurmond had done, Helms advised the State Department to reconsider its present approach given the extent of Senate support for Thurmond’s resolutions.¹²⁵

Helms’ comments reflected early arguments by conservatives that the negotiations were being conducted away from congressional oversight. However, the extent to which the senator genuinely believed the Senate should be consulted is difficult to discern. The senator’s perspective on the executive-legislative balance in foreign policy depended greatly on the policy in question, and his relationship to it. His suggestion that the State Department follow Senate resolutions was more likely a reflection of his suspicion of the department’s position, and an attempt to use all leverage available to force the department to reconsider its strategy.

Helms’ Senate Panama policy from 1973 through 1975 was ineffective in halting momentum toward new treaties: at no point did his efforts inhibit the Nixon and Ford administrations in their negotiations. However,

¹²⁴ Jesse Helms (NC), “Department of State,” *Cong. Rec.* 119 (1973), 30830, and Jeremi Suri, “Détente and Its Discontents,” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, eds. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 227.

¹²⁵ Strom Thurmond and Jesse Helms, “Senate Resolution 97 – Submission Of A Resolution Urging Retention Of Undiluted U.S. Sovereignty Over The Canal Zone,” *Cong. Rec.* 121 (1975), 5070 – 5073.

as critics of Barbara Hinckley's passive Congress theory have noted, there are often longer-term ramifications to congressional assertiveness.¹²⁶ By promoting the idea that the executive was disregarding the Senate's constitutional prerogatives, Helms helped construct a more competitive relationship between Congress and the White House.¹²⁷ It was this growing congressional discontent, combined with growing fears of an insurgent conservative campaign in the upcoming Republican primaries, which persuaded Gerald Ford to steer clear of the Canal as an issue through 1975.¹²⁸

Meanwhile, Helms' opposition to both the Nixon and Ford administrations' Panama policy helped establish his credentials as a reliable conservative internationalist. William Link points out that Helms took oppositional positions on a range of issues during the 1970s in order to promote himself as a prominent, consistent voice on behalf of conservatives.¹²⁹ Panama policy was an early example of the way he combined outspoken attacks with a legislative strategy designed to craft a substantive record of tangible resistance to policies regarded as anathema to his conservative constituency.

Despite the longevity of first-wave opposition, the Panama Canal issue had yet to develop into an electoral issue among grassroots conservatives. Helms' opposition to the Panama policies of the Nixon and Ford administrations was important in efforts to correct this, and was part of a vociferous but largely isolated attack by the partisan conservative

¹²⁶ James M. Scott and Ralph G. Carter, "Acting on the Hill: Congressional Assertiveness in U.S. Foreign Policy," *Congress & the Presidency* 29, No. 2 (Autumn, 2009), 154.

¹²⁷ Scott and Carter, "Acting on the Hill," 164.

¹²⁸ Major, *Prize Possession*, 343-344, and Stephen S. Rosenfeld, "The Panama Negotiations: A Close Run Thing," *Foreign Affairs* 54, No. 1 (October, 1975), 9-10.

¹²⁹ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 138.

press and a handful of congressional issue-leaders. In 1976, however, Helms would play a critical role in turning the Canal question into a matter of national debate. In doing so, he helped launch Ronald Reagan toward the presidency, promoted his own position as one of American conservatism's most celebrated leaders, and began more than a decade and a half of prolific foreign policy activism in Central America.

Helms, Reagan and Second Wave Opposition, 1976

In *The Reagans: A Political Portrait*, long-time Reagan adviser Peter Hannaford recalled a late October 1974 discussion between the future president and Jesse Helms in a Charlotte hotel shortly before Reagan was due to speak at a fundraiser for the senator:

We had about twenty minutes to wait in his suite before leaving for the auditorium where the dinner was to be held. Helms and Reagan were talking about various issues when the senator mentioned that he was disturbed that the Ford administration was permitting near-secret negotiations to go forward between the United States and Panama for the purpose of eventually turning the canal over to Panama. The governor expressed surprise at this and said he wanted to look into it.

According to Hannaford, this was the first time Ronald Reagan encountered the Canal as an issue.¹³⁰

In the months that followed, Reagan took a closer interest in the Canal. As an increasing proportion of his mail began to criticise the negotiations, he began to talk more frequently in public on the subject. He condemned the negotiations in conversation with Republican and

¹³⁰ Peter Hannaford, *The Reagans: A Political Portrait* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1983), 75-76.

conservative groups, even going as far as to repeat an assertion Helms made in April 1975 that Kissinger planned to unilaterally turn over control of the Zone's emergency and postal services to Panama.¹³¹ By mid-1975, Reagan was commenting publicly on the Canal issue in speeches around the country and his various syndicated columns.¹³² When he chose to challenge Ford for the 1976 Republican presidential nomination, Reagan did so with a growing sense of the Canal's importance to conservatives disgruntled by the president's commitment to the foreign policies of his predecessor. Second-wave opposition emerged because of it, as anti-Treaties elites and a newly vocal grass-roots community coalesced around Reagan's candidacy in their efforts to stop new treaties.

After a disappointing showing in the early Republican primaries, however, the Canal issue appeared unlikely to rescue Reagan from an ignominious withdrawal from the race. His faltering campaign limped to North Carolina in March with prominent Republicans publicly urging him to abandon his efforts and unify behind Ford.¹³³ What happened next was both a testament to Helms' political savvy, but also to the power of the foreign policy narrative the senator and his movement conservative allies had constructed around the Canal. Under the guidance of Helms and his political adviser Tom Ellis, Reagan emerged from the Tar Heel state with a shock primary victory. Helms' Congressional Club – a model of New Right effectiveness in voter registration, fund-raising, and media savvy – gave Reagan significant advantages over a Ford campaign tethered to the ineffective and disorganised Republican establishment in North Carolina. At the same time, Helms and Ellis pushed Reagan toward a much stronger

¹³¹ "Helms Warns Against Panama Canal Giveaway," *Human Events*, 26 April, 1975, 6.

¹³² Hannaford, *The Reagans*, 75-76, and Clymer, *Drawing the Line*, 21 – 22.

¹³³ "Reagan Bars Governors' Bid to Quit," *Washington Post*, 20 March, 1976, A4.

conservative message on the campaign trail.¹³⁴ Fundamental to this vision was a more chauvinistic, robust foreign policy, which resonated with voters increasingly disenchanted with détente.¹³⁵

An important part of the Helms-Ellis strategy was to encourage Reagan to regularly cite the Panama Canal negotiations as an example of the failure of détente.¹³⁶ Though this wasn't the first time Reagan used the Canal on the campaign trail, it marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of the anti-Treaties campaign.¹³⁷ Reagan's telegenic appeal ensured the themes that Helms had been talking about for the previous two years took on greater resonance with voters, and the Canal played a significant, even decisive, role in the primary: polls indicated that Republican voters had voted for Reagan out of growing fears over détente and a perceived decline in the nation's prestige, in Panama and across the globe.¹³⁸ Ford supporters understood the significance of the moment, acknowledging that opposition to the treaties had now permeated the Republican electorate. "Our only real weakness", said one Ford backer, "was foreign policy, and they used that to sneak through the net. It wasn't organization, it was Sally Jones, sitting at home, watching Ronald Reagan on television and deciding that she didn't want to give away the Panama Canal."¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 157.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Clymer, *Drawing the Line*, 29-31.

¹³⁷ According to Mary McGrory, Reagan received rapturous applause during a campaign stop in the New Hampshire primary when he argued, "We bought it, we paid for it." Mary McGrory, "Panama Canal dirt just won't wash away," *The New York Times*, 17 July, 1977, a5.

¹³⁸ Joseph Lelyveld, "Reagan's Upset Victory in North Carolina Attributed to Impact of Last-Minutes TV Speech," *The New York Times*, 29 March, 1976, 22, and "Mr Reagan slides - uphill," *Chicago Tribune*, 25 March, 1976, a2.

¹³⁹ R. W. Apple, Jr., "Uphill Fight for Reagan, Carter Despite North Carolina Victories," *The New York Times*, 25 March, 1976, 30.

For Helms, the primary established his position as the dominant force in the North Carolina Republican Party and as a national conservative leader.¹⁴⁰ At the same time, the senator's work helped push the Canal to the centre of the national debate over détente in the wake of South Vietnam's collapse.¹⁴¹ It was in North Carolina that the Canal emerged as the issue that would, as Natasha Zaretsky contends, crystallise the debate over U.S. foreign policy in the mid-to-late 1970s.¹⁴²

Helms now sought to capitalise on this momentum. In May, with Reagan continuing to press the Canal issue in his resurgent campaign, Helms took to the Senate floor to condemn the capture of an American yacht, *Sea Wolf*, by Panamanian defence forces operating within the territorial waters of the Zone. The senator presented the seizure of *Sea Wolf* as the most obvious example to date of the fatal flaws in the nation's Canal policy and an instance of American weakness, attacking Ford and Kissinger for authoring a foreign policy of surrender and retreat.¹⁴³ What made *Sea Wolf* so important was that the issue belonged solely to Helms. The senator picked up on information provided by a small section of the Panamanian press, and his staff corroborated the report through a knowledgeable government source.¹⁴⁴ When the senator rose to speak on the Senate floor on 28 May, he not only possessed a greater level of knowledge about *Sea Wolf* than just about anyone in the country, let alone Congress, but he could also present himself as a credible conduit for

¹⁴⁰ Kalman, *Right Star Rising*, 167, and Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 158.

¹⁴¹ Jeremy Suri, "Détente and Its Discontents," in *Rightward Bound: Making American Conservative in the 1970s*, eds. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 236.

¹⁴² Natasha Zaretsky, "Restraint or Retreat? The Debate Over the Panama Canal Treaties and U.S. Nationalism After Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 35, No. 3 (June, 2011), 537.

¹⁴³ Jesse Helms (NC), "Seizure By Panama Of U.S.-Flag Vessel In U.S. Territorial Waters," *Cong. Rec.* 122 (1976), 15981 – 15982.

¹⁴⁴ This source, according to Helms, was a U.S. Marshal.

information coming from Panama. As a means of demonstrating issue leadership, this was a significant advantage.¹⁴⁵

Helms' *Sea Wolf* narrative pushed three connected strands of the conservative anti-Treaties argument. Firstly, he focused on the violation of territory and sovereignty by an aggressive, devious Panamanian government (implicitly re-iterating Roosevelt's attacks on Colombian behaviour at the turn of the twentieth century). The senator described the apprehension of the yacht as an act of state-sponsored piracy, 'well within the 10-mile wide sea corridor and within the 3-mile limit of the Canal Zone.' The ship used to execute the seizure, he claimed, had waited without running lights inside U.S. territory before opening fire on the *Sea Wolf* with heavy arms. Moreover, it detained the yacht and its crew in violation of a Balboa court order permitting the vessel to sail back to the U.S.

Panama's actions, Helms told his colleagues, demonstrated the folly of negotiations with a government that 'does not recognize the basic principles of international law.' Moreover, the Torrijos government had protected a former American citizen, now an officer in the Panamanian Defence Forces, entangled in a protracted legal dispute over an outstanding repair bill for the yacht.¹⁴⁶ Panama, through collusion between the judiciary, defence forces, and private citizens, had condoned 'an unseemly

¹⁴⁵ Hersman, *Friends and Foes*, 7, Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 2, and Jessica Mathews, "Power Shift," *Foreign Affairs* 76, No. 1 (January-February, 1997), 52.

¹⁴⁶ Helms referred to information that this former U.S. citizen had sought to claim ownership of the *Sea Wolf* through fraudulently obtained registry documents. The Panamanian court's decision to authorise an illegal change in registry of the vessel was indicative, according to Helms, of a corrupt – or at the very least, incompetent – Panamanian judicial system. Helms, "Seizure By Panama Of U.S.-Flag Vessel In U.S. Territorial Waters," *Cong. Rec.* 122 (1976), 15981.

conflict of interest for personal profit... at the expense of U.S. sovereignty.’¹⁴⁷

The senator used the *Sea Wolf* affair to exert pressure on the Department of State. Helms accused the foreign service of endangering the lives of American citizens by failing to comprehend the potential ramifications of the *Sea Wolf*'s legal troubles. He reserved special condemnation for Ambassador William Jorden, whom he charged with negligence and incompetence for failing to prevent the incident. Jorden and the State Department's ignorance of the unfolding legal controversy over the repair bill, Helms claimed, precipitated the illegal seizure of the yacht, and allowed Panama to directly – and, apparently, successfully – challenge U.S. sovereignty in the Canal Zone.¹⁴⁸

Helms also argued that the department's inability to engage in constructive talks over the fate of the vessel prior to its seizure undermined their credibility as negotiators over the Canal. State's lack of awareness, Helms argued, called into question 'its capability to negotiate in good faith on the more basic issues.' In questioning the department's competence, the senator tied *Sea Wolf* to the wider conservative narrative of an ineffective foreign service regularly outwitted by opponents across the negotiating table. Moreover, Helms charged the State Department with conducting diplomacy in secret, away from public and congressional scrutiny, allowing it to carry out its policies of surrender and retreat without challenge. The lack of a formal public protest over the yacht suggested, in the senator's mind, that State did not wish to assert U.S. sovereignty in the matter. Such an approach, Helms argued, 'undercuts not only any negotiations, but even our present status. This is not an occasion

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 15982.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

for secret diplomacy. This is an occasion for firmness and balance. Secret diplomacy is a sign of weakness and a sign of withdrawal.’¹⁴⁹

Helms’ charge that Kissinger, and also President Ford, bore responsibility for this echoed the wider conservative critique of a grand strategy mired in moral and physical weakness. The *Sea Wolf* became emblematic of the decline in American power and prestige. Helms grandly declared:

When a U.S.-flag ship can be captured in waters where we undisputedly exercise sovereign power, and the action is done with impunity, then the whole conduct of our foreign policy and the role of the United States in the leadership of the West is in doubt.¹⁵⁰

Helms had the room to launch such a broad, stinging criticism of the Ford administration because he didn’t have to resolve the *Sea Wolf* case. Reminiscent of John F. Kennedy’s manipulation of the Eisenhower administration’s Cuba policy during the 1960 election campaign, Helms ignored the fact that not only had the State Department delivered an oral protest, but that stronger action was not taken at the specific request of the yacht’s owners.¹⁵¹ Just as Richard Nixon, as the sitting Vice President, had been constrained by the practicalities of governing while Kennedy was free to throw out accusations, so too did the Ford administration appear vulnerable only because officials had to conduct quiet, behind-the-scenes diplomacy in pursuit of U.S. interests.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 15981 – 15982.

¹⁵¹ “U.S. Senator Charges ‘Piracy’ In Panamanian Seizure of Yacht,” *The New York Times*, 29 May, 1976, 6.

Helms once remarked that it was “a lot easier to throw a grenade than it is to catch one”, and there was no doubting that he pursued this aggressive “bomb-throwing” style of criticism because he was looking to score points off *Sea Wolf*, rather than manage the situation effectively.¹⁵² The yacht thus became a demonstration of the dynamics of conservatism when out of power. In later years, especially during the Reagan administration, this approach would be tested by the reality of governing.

At this point, however, the senator did not have to be concerned with political reality, as was evident in his subsequent proposal that President Ford not only cease negotiations over the Canal, but also reactivate the Naval Special Services Squadron so as to reassert U.S. sovereignty and rights of free passage through the Canal. The *Sea Wolf* incident was patently never going to threaten the momentum of negotiations, and the historical connotations of deploying U.S. battleships in the waters of the Caribbean were highly provocative in a region previously accustomed to American gunboat diplomacy. Indeed, it had been the Naval Special Services Squadron that served as the spear tip of U.S. military power in the Caribbean during the 1920s, pursuing political stability and expanded capital markets through both the threat and application of American intervention.¹⁵³ In advocating a renewed naval presence in the area, Helms was calling for a return to policies that had partly stoked the resentment and tension that underpinned Panama’s current

¹⁵² Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 338.

¹⁵³ Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011), 234, Peter H. Smith, *Talons of the Eagle: Dynamics of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 50-86, Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 125-315, and Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine, 1945 – 1993* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 25-34.

demands – but which fitted in with the glorification of Rooseveltian power projection in the western hemisphere.

Having witnessed Ford's approval ratings increase in the aftermath of the *Mayaguez* incident in May 1975, in which the president deployed U.S. forces to rescue the crew of an American transport ship captured by the Cambodian Khmer Rouge, Helms may have expected his proposals to appeal to populist sentiment.¹⁵⁴ The senator had previously tied *Mayaguez* to Panama, commenting only days after the military operation to free the captured cargo vessel that such a response was applicable to the Canal Zone. 'We have learned how important it is to stand up for our rights,' he told senators, 'and we should do so in the Canal Zone.'¹⁵⁵ Helms' dismay at Ford's inaction in the *Sea Wolf* case perhaps reflected his frustration that the president seemed unwilling to demonstrate decisive leadership in the aftermath of *Mayaguez*.¹⁵⁶

Though Helms saw *Sea Wolf* as a critical component of the anti-Treaties campaign, it was not a widely-held sentiment among conservatives. No other member of Congress commented on the incident, and while Helms successfully generated national media interest in the case, this quickly dissipated when the Ford administration quickly and quietly secured the yacht's release. A late-night White House press statement confirmed the matter was closed, and attention drifted to other matters.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Gorden L. Bowen, "Presidential Action and Public Opinion about U.S. Nicaraguan Policy: Limits to the "Rally 'Round the Flag" Syndrome," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 22, No. 4. (December, 1989), 796.

¹⁵⁵ Jesse Helms (NC), "The Panama Canal," *Cong. Rec.* 121 (1975), 14558.

¹⁵⁶ For conservative support for Ford after *Mayaguez*, see "Ford's Cambodian Move A Breath of Fresh Air," *Human Events*, 24 May, 1975, 1, and Lou Cannon, "Ford Action Applauded by Friends, Foes," *Washington Post*, 16 May, 1975, A1.

¹⁵⁷ "U.S. Senator Charges 'Piracy'," 6, "Panama Releases U.S. Yacht It Seized and Held Six Days," *Washington Post*, 30 May, 1976, 55, and "Panama frees seized U.S. boat," *Chicago Tribune*, 29 May, 1976, B6.

A month later, after *Sea Wolf* returned to the United States, Helms tried in vain to renew pressure on the Ford administration by noting statements made by the yacht's master that the United States could no longer protect naval traffic entering or exiting the Canal. Such words, Helms argued, 'bear an ominous ring for the future of our leadership and power.'¹⁵⁸ But this had no appreciable impact on either Congress or the media.

The entrepreneurial streak that characterised Helms' foreign policy was now deployed in pursuit of this more confrontational Cold War vision. Enjoying the support of movement conservatives delighted by the senator's work on behalf of Ronald Reagan in the North Carolina primary, Helms endeavoured to alter the Republican Party's Panama Canal policy during its 1976 national convention.¹⁵⁹ Helms' plank proposed that the United States would not "give up that which is ours" nor permit any efforts to "relinquish United States sovereignty and control" in the Zone.¹⁶⁰ Offering a conservative plank on Panama represented one element of a wider campaign by Tom Ellis to persuade conservative Ford delegates to switch to Reagan.¹⁶¹ Helms, Ellis, and a faction of New Rightists – including the senator's aides Jim Lucier and John Carbaugh, North Carolina academic and future senator John East, and Rep. Philip Crane's administrative assistant, Rich Williamson – wanted "red meat", as Hannaford recalled, in an effort to split the platform committee and weaken Ford's support base.¹⁶² Just as in North Carolina, however, John Sears feared that Helms and his allies

¹⁵⁸ Jesse Helms (NC), "U.S Registered Yacht "Sea Wolf" Attacked By Panamanian Patrol Vessel – More Information," *Cong. Rec.* 122 (1976), 19644-19645.

¹⁵⁹ Spencer Rich, "GOP Unit Backs Abortion Plank," *Washington Post*, 11 August, 1976, A8.

¹⁶⁰ Clymer, *Drawing the Line*, 37, and Arthur Siddon, "Ford loses some to win some," *Chicago Tribune*, 12 August, 1976, 5.

¹⁶¹ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 159.

¹⁶² Hannaford, *The Reagans*, 128-130.

risked marginalising centrist Republicans.¹⁶³ Sears did not want a bitter platform fight that might damage Reagan's chances of securing enough votes for the nomination.¹⁶⁴ Senior Reagan advisers were thus careful to maintain their distance from the more provocative elements of Helms' proposal.¹⁶⁵

Though a relatively minor difference, it nevertheless indicated early tensions between the pragmatists that surrounded Ronald Reagan and the movement conservatives, led by Helms, who also sought to influence the future president. When Reagan entered the Oval Office, these differences intensified, as Helms' commitment to an unyielding conservative Central American policy clashed with the strategy of those concerned with constructing workable policies. Helms would come to lament elements of President Reagan's policies, and while he consistently blamed their differences on Reagan's advisers, he nevertheless admitted that 'I could not compromise principle' even for a cherished friendship.¹⁶⁶

Thus, although it appeared insignificant within the context of the bitter intra-party fight being waged in 1976, the fate of the Helms Group's foreign policy platform – including its tough language on Panama – augured poorly for the senator's influence in the Reagan inner circle. Indeed, the limitation of Helms' influence was amply demonstrated by the fate of the Panama proposals. Sears did not completely marginalise Helms and his

¹⁶³ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 151-152, 159-161.

¹⁶⁴ Sears had already tried to prevent Ellis from organising a meeting of the candidate's state managers designed to shore up support for the conservative counter-platform. Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 159. Peter Hannaford later claimed that Sears had sought to head off any possible platform dispute. Clymer, *Drawing the Line*, 37.

¹⁶⁵ Jon Margolis and Arthur Siddon, "Reagan bid to free delegates fails," *Chicago Tribune*, 11 August, 1976, 1. Hannaford notes that while Reagan staff worked with the Helms Group, the senator's allies 'usually wanted more fiery language than we did'. Hannaford, *The Reagans*, 129.

¹⁶⁶ Helms, *Here's Where I Stand*, 117.

allies, but when the foreign policy showdown with the Ford forces occurred, Reagan's team quietly sacrificed Helms' Panama language in exchange for a series of concessions from the Ford camp.¹⁶⁷

When the final Republican Party platform was revealed, the section on Panama proved to be a reaffirmation of the Ford administration's current framework for negotiations:

The present Panama Canal Treaty provides that the United States has jurisdictional rights in the Canal Zone as "if it were the sovereign." The United States intends that the Panama Canal be preserved as an international waterway for the ships of all nations. This secure access is enhanced by a relationship that commands the respect of Americans and Panamanians and benefits the people of both countries. In any talks with Panama, however, the United States negotiators should in no way cede, dilute, forfeit, negotiate or transfer any rights, power, authority, jurisdiction, territory or property that are necessary for the protection and security of the United States and the entire Western Hemisphere.¹⁶⁸

When the robust language was stripped away, the platform provided sufficient political cover for the president to transfer any 'rights, power, authority, jurisdiction, territory or property' he saw fit, as long as he could justify it from a national and international security perspective.¹⁶⁹ Though

¹⁶⁷ "Conservatives Show Strength At GOP Platform Hearings," *Human Events*, 21 August, 1976, 5, Jules Witcover, "Reagan Forces and Helms' 'Rebels' Get Together," *Washington Post*, 12 August, 1976, A6, and Clymer, *Drawing the Line*, 37.

¹⁶⁸ Republican Party Platforms, "Republican Party Platform of 1976," 18 August, 1976, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* accessed 26 February, 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25843>.

¹⁶⁹ Clymer, *Drawing the Line*, 38.

conservatives lauded the Helms Group for its efforts, the national Republican Party remained wedded to the Kissingerian framework in the Isthmus.¹⁷⁰

Of course, the fact that Ford was nominated for the Republican presidential candidacy was the bitterest pill of all. Nevertheless, the senator and his allies left the convention believing they had secured the Party's official condemnation of both the tone and substance of Ford's current foreign policies. In language titled 'Morality In Foreign Policy', inserted as a preamble to the foreign policy plank, the Republican Party declared:

Ours will be a foreign policy which recognizes that in international negotiations we must make no undue concessions; that in pursuing detente we must not grant unilateral favors with only the hope of getting future favors in return.

Agreements that are negotiated, such as the one signed in Helsinki, must not take from those who do not have freedom the hope of one day gaining it.

Finally, we are firmly committed to a foreign policy in which secret agreements, hidden from our people, will have no part.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ "Republicans Ok Platform Repudiating Ford Policy," *Human Events*, 28 August, 1976, 3. For other examples of praise for Helms from the magazine, see "Conservatives Show Strength At GOP Platform Hearings," 5, "Ford Bows to Kissinger Rebuke," *Human Events*, 28 August, 1976, 3, and "Delegates Failed to Follow Their Conservative Instincts," *Human Events*, 28 August, 1978, 1.

¹⁷¹ Republican Party Platforms, "Republican Party Platform of 1976," 18 August, 1976, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed 26 February, 2013. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25843>.

Though the language did not mention Panama specifically, as Helms had desired when advising on the section's content, it was a targeted repudiation of Ford and Kissinger.¹⁷² The president and his advisers knew it, and Ford later recalled:

When I read the plank, I was furious. It added up to nothing less than a slick denunciation of Administration foreign policy. Kissinger wanted me to take on the Reaganites. They were trying to humiliate us publicly, he said, and we shouldn't let them get away with it.¹⁷³

Persuaded by his political managers that losing the floor fight over the 'Morality' plank would scuttle his chances of the nomination, Ford relented. The Helms Group had wanted a floor fight for this very reason, and they were outraged when attempts to force a roll-call vote on the plank were denied by the chairman of the convention. Ellis, having lost his voice from strenuous discussions during the week, attempted to call on John Rhodes, chair of the convention, to force a vote from the floor. Rhodes, a Ford ally, ignored Helms' adviser. To add insult to injury for the senator's group, it has been suggested that John Sears ordered Ellis' microphone to be shut off in order to avoid the floor fight conservatives so badly desired.¹⁷⁴ For Helms, it was an early experience of the leverage to be gained from placing allies within the structures of decision-making, and considering his later approaches to foreign policy in Central America, it was a lesson he took to heart.

While Helms failed in his efforts to redirect Republican policy on the Canal, increased attention on the fate of the waterway pushed it to the centre-stage of the national political scene. During the 1976 presidential

¹⁷² Hannaford, *The Reagans*, 130-131, and Clymer, *Drawing the Line*, 37.

¹⁷³ Ford, *A Time To Heal*, 398.

¹⁷⁴ Hannaford, *The Reagans*, 133-134.

election, political commentators observed a substantial increase in the level of popular interest in the Canal and, magnified by riots in the Isthmus in September, the issue became central to the foreign policy debate between Ford and his Democratic challenger, Jimmy Carter.¹⁷⁵ Both candidates were responding to fears, long stoked by conservatives, about the failures of détente and the implications for American prestige and security should new treaties be signed. Ford and Carter shifted noticeably to the right, looking to protect themselves against accusations that they were undermining the nation's historical legacy and its current status as a superpower.¹⁷⁶ Thus did Helms aid the collapse of the 'Republican center' in the 1970s, as Ford became more hawkish on the Canal: continuing to insist on negotiations, but increasingly strident about the necessity of maintaining control.¹⁷⁷ Carter, while striking at the immorality of the nation's recent history of international relations, nevertheless asserted that as president he would commit to 'complete control or practical control' of the Canal in perpetuity. It was an assertion that drew significant

¹⁷⁵ Henry L. Trewhitt, who moderated the foreign policy debate between the candidates, pointed out that the Panama Canal had been the subject of most of the correspondence he had received on foreign policy issues prior to the debate. "Transcript of Foreign Affairs Debate Between Ford and Carter," *The New York Times*, 7 October, 1976, 36. The national daily media began to cite the Canal as one issue that demonstrated a clear separation between Ford and Carter. Coverage of the Panamanian riots did not make front-pages, but it nevertheless focused attention on the Isthmus during the election season. Joanne Omang, "National Guard Quells Student Protest in Panama," *Washington Post*, 21 September, 1976, A16, "Our riots U.S. fault -- Panama," *Chicago Tribune*, 18 September, 1976, 3, and "G.I. and 2 Employees of U.S. Held By Panama for Stirring Disorders," *The New York Times*, 18 September, 1976, 40. The media picked on the Canal as one of the key issues raised by the foreign policy debate between Ford and Carter. Bernard Gwertzman, "Some Major Differences," *The New York Times*, 8 October, 1976, 19.

¹⁷⁶ Hogan, *Panama Canal*, 86.

¹⁷⁷ Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy*, 269.

consternation from the Panama government but some cheer to residents of the Zone.¹⁷⁸

Whether or not the Canal was a decisive issue in the 1976 election is debatable. LaFeber contends that, as with the majority of foreign policy issues in American electoral history, the Canal had no impact on voters.¹⁷⁹ Conservatives were certainly unimpressed with both candidates' comments, despite the apparent hardening of their rhetoric. *Human Events* summarised the right's pessimism when it declared 'Americans Are Losers In Second Debate', and chastised both men for not proclaiming an unequivocal commitment to U.S. sovereignty in the Zone.¹⁸⁰ Though movement conservatives tended to favour Ford, the magazine's support was only ever lukewarm.¹⁸¹

The Panama Canal Treaties, 1977-1978

Had Jimmy Carter maintained his ambiguous attitude toward the negotiations, Helms and his movement conservative allies would likely have required a different foreign policy issue to mobilise against liberal internationalism. Arms limitations talks (SALT II) or the fate of the B-1 bomber would perhaps have been the most likely candidates, but the right

¹⁷⁸ It was, as with a number of Carter's election statements on the Canal, difficult to ascertain his genuine commitment. He subsequently vacillated on the timeframe of his commitment, declaring that he would not give up control 'any time in the foreseeable future.' "Transcript of Foreign Affairs Debate Between Ford and Carter," *The New York Times*, 7 October, 1976, 36. See also Joanne Omang, "Doubts About Carter's Stand Heighten Tension in Panama," *Washington Post*, 8 November, 1976, A14, and "Panama Says Carter Raises Cost On Talks," *The New York Times*, 7 October, 1976.

¹⁷⁹ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 192.

¹⁸⁰ "Americans Are Losers In Second Debate," *Human Events*, 16 October, 1976, 1.

¹⁸¹ *Human Events* reluctantly endorsed Ford, though it lamented that in foreign policy 'there doesn't seem much to choose between the two.' "A Reluctant Vote for Gerald Ford," *Human Events*, 30 October, 1976, 1.

recognised that technical issues like these did not have the emotional impact of the Canal. It was Carter's decision to prioritise new agreements with Panama on the basis of a transfer of sovereignty, and his inclusion of the treaties as part of his wider framework of a moralistic liberal internationalism, that encouraged Helms and his allies to intensify their existing anti-Treaties efforts.¹⁸² In doing so, they began the third wave of a campaign that made a significant contribution to the triumph of the Reaganite foreign policy agenda in 1980.

On 18 January 1976, Helms wrote to Carter, assuring the president-elect that he would work with him 'in any way possible for the benefit of our nation... nothing would please me more than to see you become the best President the United States has ever had.'¹⁸³ The senator recognised that a shared southern, Baptist upbringing and Navy service held out the possibility of a bridge across the ideological divide.¹⁸⁴ Perhaps, given Carter's oscillating rhetoric on the Canal during the election campaign, Helms also hoped that the new president would adhere to the more aggressive defence of American interests in the Zone that Carter had promised.

In mid-January 1977, however, only days before his inauguration, Carter informed Congress that he would make new treaties with Panama a

¹⁸² Scott Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 73-74, Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 109-111, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1983), 134.

¹⁸³ Letter, Senator Jesse Helms to President Carter, 18 January, 1977, folder "[Senate Correspondence, 1977 – Hayakawa, Heinz, Helms, Hodges], [O/A 4866]," Box 62, Frank Moore's Correspondence, Office of Congressional Liaison, *Jimmy Carter Library* (hereafter *JCL*).

¹⁸⁴ Helms, *Here's Where I Stand*, 105-106

priority for his administration.¹⁸⁵ He was increasingly conscious of the Canal's status as a 'diplomatic cancer', not only for relations with Panama but also for the United States' reputation in the Third World more generally.¹⁸⁶ The president was looking to create a more open and equitable relationship between the U.S. and developing nations. This would be posited along North-South lines, instead of the traditional East-West axis of the Cold War, and Carter hoped to improve the standing of those nations previously relegated to a peripheral, often subservient, role in that conflict. Transferring the Canal to Panama would be a critical first step in this strategy. The schism between this worldview and that of Helms was, in part, why the senator later concluded that, 'Over the years, Jimmy Carter and I have demonstrated that people can start from similar places and arrive at very different destinations.'¹⁸⁷

As his national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski later recalled, with the negotiations at a critical stage and intelligence assessments suggesting an escalation in regional instability should the discussions collapse, Carter's advisers were convinced that agreeing new treaties with Panama was a strategic necessity.¹⁸⁸ In response, Helms acted swiftly to launch opening salvos against the new administration's Panama policy. Pressing on from first and second wave opposition, the senator opened up a new front by criticising the big business connections of American negotiator Sol Linowitz. Helms argued that Linowitz's directorships with

¹⁸⁵ Bernard Gwertzman, "Carter Will Pursue Early Panama And Cyprus Accord," *The New York Times*, 14 January, 1977, 1, and Murrey Marder and Don Oberdorfer, "Carter to Press For New Treaty On Panama Canal," *Washington Post*, 13 January, 1977, A12.

¹⁸⁶ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (London: Collins, 1982), 155-156.

¹⁸⁷ Helms, *Here's Where I Stand*, 105.

¹⁸⁸ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 51, and Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 33.

Marine Midland Bank and Pan American Airways were significant conflicts of interest. These two corporations, Helms noted, had made large investments in Panama aimed at supporting the financially precarious Torrijos government. Panama had been a welcoming host for international business in the post-war era, largely thanks to a series of beneficial tax reforms, but it faced an unsecure financial future in the 1970s because of trade deficits fuelled by the OPEC oil shock and Torrijos' large-scale domestic capital investment.¹⁸⁹ Helms believed Linowitz, in representing both corporate supporters of Torrijos as well as the United States government, was an unsuitable negotiator: any treaties brought about through his mediation would be 'fatally flawed.'¹⁹⁰

Helms' attack on Linowitz was a part of a concerted effort by conservatives to personalise the anti-Treaties narrative by blending the perceived flaws in the U.S. negotiating team with those of the new treaties themselves. Only the month before Helms' criticism of Linowitz, conservative media outlets had denounced the other senior American representative in the treaty talks, Ellsworth Bunker, for his long-standing connection to Henry Kissinger.¹⁹¹ Linowitz himself had also previously found himself the subject of conservative ire. Spruille Braden, a favourite diplomat among the post-war right because of his strong anti-communist, interventionist philosophy, had ridiculed Linowitz's Latin American commission by telling *Human Events* readers that the ambassador had 'little experience or knowledge of the nations to the south of us.'¹⁹² The

¹⁸⁹ Moffett provides a detailed, if sympathetic, account of the reasons for Panama's financial insecurity and the growth of banking influence. Moffett III, *Limits of Victory*, 149-151.

¹⁹⁰ Jesse Helms (NC), "Sol Linowitz: Banker And Treaty Negotiator - A Conflict?" *Cong. Rec.* 123 (1977), 4807.

¹⁹¹ Robert S. Allen, "Carter Should Dump Bunker," *Human Events*, 2 January, 1977, 14.

¹⁹² Spruille Braden, "Cuba: Soviets' Fourth Step Toward World Conquest," *Human Events*, 8 March, 1975, 17.

same publication also accused Linowitz of being a foreign agent for Salvador Allende's leftist Chilean government.¹⁹³ Helms continued this pattern, reinforcing the perception among grassroots conservatives that the treaties were being introduced by government officials who were ignorant, dangerously leftist, or both.

Yet while much of this criticism of Linowitz (and Bunker) reflected a consensus among conservatives that Carter's negotiators were bastions of détente, there was also a sense among Helms and the conservative anti-Treaties lobby that Linowitz was representative of a growing challenge to the accepted norms of foreign policy. Conservatives were concerned that the Carter administration's managerialist approach, partly reflected in the president's faith in transnational banking and finance as instruments of American power, neglected traditional concepts of strength derived from physical manifestations of power (which, in the case of Panama, meant territory).¹⁹⁴ Suggestions that the multinational business and banking community was exerting influence on the Panama Canal negotiations was therefore seized upon as evidence of a dangerous usurpation of the nation's Cold War objectives – in doing so, conservatives also implicitly re-activated Roosevelt's own criticism of moneyed interests as a factor in foreign policy.¹⁹⁵

Fuelling this concern was the fusionist, pristine capitalist economic framework that formed one of the core principles of Helms' conservatism. The senator understood the pursuit of corporate wealth to be subordinate to wider moral responsibilities, and in Panama he saw a financial community abrogating its moral responsibility to support American

¹⁹³ "Capital Briefs," *Human Events*, 12 February, 1977, 2.

¹⁹⁴ Zaretsky, "Restraint or Retreat," 547 and 556.

¹⁹⁵ Dueck, *Hard-Line*, 14.

national security in favour of securing profit and shareholder success.¹⁹⁶ Thus, like those traditionalist conservatives – Russell Kirk, Richard Weaver, and Robert Nisbet – who attacked the Vanderbilt, Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Morgan economic titans of the nineteenth century for their single-minded pursuit of wealth, the senator criticised his era’s financial institutions for their neglect of the public good over the Canal.¹⁹⁷ Banks like Marine Midland had provided extensive loans to the Torrijos government, he said, ‘to prop up an incompetent dictatorial regime’ in return for ‘a haven for the banks to expand their international operations.’ Having reached their lending limits, the banks believed that a rumoured annual \$40 million payment to Panama included in the new treaties would provide the funds to repay their previous loans:

is it beyond reason that the members of the banking fraternity involved in Panama are looking to the proposed surrender of U.S. sovereignty and territory in the Canal Zone as a way of propping up the Torrijos regime and providing increased revenues to his government? Is it not fair to ask whether the short range interests of those financial institutions might not be subordinated to the long-term interests of the United States?’¹⁹⁸

Moreover, his pristine capitalist ideals, similar in some ways to Jefferson’s agrarian republicanism, lauded physical produce and local structures over the intangible corporate economic assets such as stocks and bonds and the institutions that traded them.¹⁹⁹ This suspicion of

¹⁹⁶ Helms, *Empire for Liberty*, xxii. Helms continued to express this sentiment toward Cold War and post-Cold War foreign policy. Helms, *Empire for Liberty*, 91-102, and Susan F. Rasky, ‘What Is Good for Security May Be Bad for Business,’ *The New York Times*, 18 October, 1987, 222.

¹⁹⁷ Himmelstein, *To The Right*, 45-53 and Allitt, *The Conservatives*, 97-98.

¹⁹⁸ Helms, “Sol Linowitz: Banker And Treaty Negotiator – A Conflict?” *Cong. Rec.* 123 (1977), 4805 – 4809.

¹⁹⁹ Himmelstein, *To The Right*, 47.

opaque concentrations of economic power fed into the charges levelled by Helms and conservatives that the international banking community was a secretive and influential partner in the Carter administration's decision-making process.²⁰⁰

Exacerbating the situation for Helms was his perception that the administration had deliberately subverted congressional oversight of Linowitz's appointment by nominating him to a temporary, six-month term. The mandatory confirmation process did not cover short-term appointments, and Helms argued that the Department of State had used this fact to avoid an embarrassing investigation into Linowitz's conflicts of interest. 'The American people deserve to know how he will avoid a conflict,' the senator told his colleagues.²⁰¹ Over time, this accusation transformed into part of the senator's attack on the constitutionality of the treaties process. 'What kind of ratification process is it,' Helms later argued, 'when the Executive bypasses an essential part of it, namely, the advice and consent to Ambassadors about to undertake a major negotiation?' Stating that 'usurpation and irresponsibility lead to seizure of power and tragedy', the senator cited Linowitz's situation as exemplary of an administration 'which has constantly refused to abide by its constitutional authority, and has failed to take the Congress into its confidence about actions which are solely in the field of congressional prerogative anyway.'²⁰²

The senator's accusations gained significant traction among conservatives, and he was lauded by right-wing media for introducing the

²⁰⁰ Moffett, *Limits of Victory*, 175.

²⁰¹ Helms, "Sol Linowitz: Banker And Treaty Negotiator – A Conflict?" *Cong. Rec.* 123 (1977), 4805 – 4806.

²⁰² U.S. Senate, Committee on the Judiciary. Subcommittee on Separation of Powers, *Panama Canal Treaty (Disposition of U.S. Territory), Part 1*, 22 July, 1977, 216.

issue into the anti-Treaties campaign.²⁰³ Linowitz would later recall seeing his effigy hanged during conservative protests on Constitution Avenue in Washington D.C.²⁰⁴ Administration officials rejected the idea that there was undue corporate influence on Linowitz in the negotiations, but within a month he had quietly resigned from his position at Marine Midland Bank and stepped back from aspects of the negotiations that covered any subject linked to Pan America.²⁰⁵ The senator claimed credit for Linowitz's resignation, though tempered this self-congratulation by claiming 'public pressure' had forced the issue.²⁰⁶

Conservatives believed the Linowitz banking connection dovetailed with public fears that national policy was being subverted in the interests of the eastern Establishment and its representatives in finance and politics. The banking issue was "a sexy issue", Richard Viguerie declared. "It's a populist issue. And here's a populist president who is going to bail out David Rockefeller."²⁰⁷ Rep. George Hansen, who led on the issue in the House, asked his colleagues if it was Linowitz's job 'to get quick agreement

²⁰³ *Human Events* quickly picked upon the senator's remarks, passing them along to its readership and noting Helms – and George Hansen in the House – had been 'stirring up a squall' with the accusations. "Capital Briefs," *Human Events*, 12 March, 1977, 2.

²⁰⁴ Neil Lewis, "Sol M. Linowitz dies at 91; Businessman and Diplomat," *The New York Times*, 19 March, 2005, A13.

²⁰⁵ Graham Hovey, "Linowitz Gives Up Post at Marine Bank," *The New York Times*, 18 March, 1977, 82, and John F. Berry, "Panama Treaty Negotiator Quits N.Y. Bank Board," *Washington Post*, 19 March, 1977, A6.

²⁰⁶ Jesse Helms (NC), "Article IV, Section 3, Restrains U.S. Negotiations On Panama Canal," *Cong. Rec.* 123 (1977), 24884, and Jesse Helms (NC), "Bring Escobar To The United States; Let's See Who Stands Where," *Cong. Rec.* 123 (1977), 32996.

²⁰⁷ Moffett, *Limits of Victory*, 175. Helms had already stoked fears about the extent of Rockefeller's influence back in 1974 when he condemned the vice-president for using his wealth to construct 'a network of political dependency.' Jesse Helms (NC), "The Rockefeller Nomination," *Cong. Rec.* 120 (1974), 34320.

to quickly shore up the revenue and asset picture of the Torrijos government?’ ‘Why should the United States give up the Canal’, Hansen asked, ‘for a set of Linowtiz [sic]’ to profiteer at the expense of its citizens?’²⁰⁸ Barry Goldwater (R-AZ) told the Senate that ‘our large banks and international banks have a lot more to do with this treaty than meets the eye.’²⁰⁹ Helms’ February 1977 banking comments were one of the most important contributions he made to the anti-Treaties campaign.

While Linowitz, Bunker, and the banks represented a new facet of the anti-Treaties argument, Helms maintained his focus on those principles that had long unified the opposition. In the weeks after his criticism of Linowitz, the senator rounded on those who argued the United States could continue to control the Canal even without sovereignty. Drawing on the opinions of Hanson W. Baldwin, a noted anti-Treaties campaigner and former military editor of *The New York Times*, Helms argued that ‘surrender of U.S. sovereignty over the Canal Zone means loss of control over the Panama Canal.’ A combination of ‘courage and caution’ was required in dealing with the current situation in the Isthmus, he said, but the simple fact was that ‘the United States is a great and powerful Nation and Panama is small and weak.’²¹⁰

Helms’ assertions of national superiority, and appeals to the sovereignty argument, became both more frequent and more strident in the third wave of opposition. They emphasised the Rooseveltian understanding of the Canal’s role in America’s past, present, and future.

²⁰⁸ George Hansen (ID), “Sol Linowitz – A Study In Conflicts Of Interest,” *Cong. Rec.* 28923 – 28926. Hansen continued this theme late in 1977. George Hansen (ID), “Carter’s Canal Treaties – A Bail Out For The Big Banks,” *Cong. Rec.* 123 (1977), 39756-39758.

²⁰⁹ Barry Goldwater (AZ), “Treaty Concerning The Permanent Neutrality And Operation Of The Panama Canal,” *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 3058.

²¹⁰ Jesse Helms (NC), “U.S. Canal Zone And Panama Canal: Control Without Sovereignty Is Double-Speak,” *Cong. Rec.* 123 (1977), 9447.

Repeatedly describing the transfer of authority as ‘handing over’ the waterway, or as a ‘surrender’ and ‘give-away’ reminded Americans of the core claims made by Roosevelt at the turn of the century.²¹¹ It not only challenged the Carter administration’s understanding of the Hay–Bunau-Varilla Treaty, but also the manner in which they sold new treaties to the public.

It also defended Roosevelt from a line of criticism that had been frequently directed toward the president in his own time. Many of Roosevelt’s political contemporaries were sceptical of his claim to have negotiated complete sovereignty for the United States over the Canal Zone. His Secretary of War, William Howard Taft, for example, was a notable dissenter. His conclusion in a letter to Roosevelt that Panama retained "titular sovereignty" in the Isthmus underpinned the arguments of those in the 1970s who understood U.S. control as founded on, at best, a muddled understanding of the Hay–Bunau-Varilla Treaty – or, at worst, a deliberately deceptive interpretation.²¹² Zbigniew Brzezinski, responding to William Rogers of the anti-Treaties American Legion, channeled Taft in succinctly pointing out: ‘We do not have sovereignty over the Canal or the Zone and never have. The Treaty of 1903 gives us rights, power, and authority to exercise as if we were sovereign, not as the sovereign.’²¹³ In defending sovereignty, Helms guarded and prolonged Roosevelt’s intentions for the United States in Panama.

Moreover, Helms struck back against those who suggested that his country had acted with impropriety in 1903 or in subsequent years. The

²¹¹ For examples, see Jesse Helms (NC), “The Panama Canal Can Be Defended,” *Cong. Rec.* 123 (1977), 17096, Jesse Helms (NC), “Treaty Concerning The Permanent Neutrality And Operation Of The Panama Canal,” *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 7170, and Helms, *Here’s Where I Stand*, 109.

²¹² LaFeber, *Panama Canal*, 35.

²¹³ Letter, Zbigniew Brzezinski to William Rogers, 27 July, 1977, FO 3-1/Panama Canal 8/1/77 – 8/15/77, Box FO16, WHCF – Subject File, *JCL*.

United States, the senator argued, had operated and maintained the Canal 'with honor and integrity' and with 'utmost efficiency and service to the world.'²¹⁴ It was a fabrication, concocted by the media, that there was anything shameful or regrettable about U.S. action in Panama.²¹⁵ In doing so, Helms stood up for a president who, in his own time, had suffered similar accusations.²¹⁶ Roosevelt's own Secretary of State, Elihu Root, had gone as far as to quietly reproach the president for perceived lapses in integrity over the episode.²¹⁷ Seventy years later, Helms played an important role in an anti-treaties campaign that continually and emphatically defended Roosevelt's conduct.²¹⁸

In mid-June 1977, Helms also joined with Senators Thurmond, McClellan, and Harry Byrd, Jr. in writing to Carter to support four retired naval chiefs of staff who told the president that negotiators should be instructed 'to retain full sovereign control' over the Canal and the Zone. The waterway, the former chiefs declared, was 'as important, if not more so, to

²¹⁴ Helms, "Treaty Concerning The Permanent Neutrality And Operation Of The Panama Canal," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 7170.

²¹⁵ Jesse Helms (NC), "Accuracy In Media Corrects New York Times On Panama Canal," *Cong. Rec.* 123 (1977), 10522.

²¹⁶ One of the most vocal opponents was Senator John Tyler Morgan (D-Al.). See "Morgan is mad about Panama," *Atlanta Constitution*, 3 January, 1904, b7, "Panama Issue Made," *The New York Times*, 5 January, 1904, 1, and "Morgan Wants Panama," *The New York Times*, 21 January, 1904, 5, for instances of Morgan's outspoken attacks on the president's conduct. Senator Charles A. Culberson went as far as to describe the incident as "the most disgraceful diplomatic episode in all the annals of America." "Attacks the President," *The New York Times*, 11 January, 1904, 2.

²¹⁷ Secretary of State Elihu Root infamously remarked to Roosevelt during a Cabinet meeting "You have shown that you were accused of seduction and you have conclusively proved that you were guilty of rape." Major, *Prize Possession*, 58.

²¹⁸ Phillip M. Crane, *Surrender in Panama: The Case Against the Treaty* (Ottawa: Green Hill Publishers, Inc, 1978), 5-12, and Clymer, *Drawing the Line*, 65-67.

the United States than ever.’²¹⁹ Describing these individuals as ‘among the greatest living naval strategists today, both in terms of experience and judgement’, Helms and his colleagues hoped that ‘you [Carter] will find such action wholly consistent with our national interest and will act accordingly.’²²⁰

Helms regarded the letter from the retired chiefs as a decisive blow to the argument that sovereignty in the Zone was no longer a military necessity. On 30 June, in remarks on the Senate floor, he expressed his confidence in the analysis provided by these retired officers:

In a period when armchair diplomats and guilt-burdened journalists are pronouncing the canal undefendable and of no strategic value, the voices of those distinguished public servants, who have given their lives and careers to the defense of our Nation, rise together to attest the value – even the ever-increasing value – of the canal to the defense of this Nation and the free world.

The nation, Helms told his colleagues, ‘has no reservoir of experience and judgment concerning naval strategy more valuable to us than this group of men.’²²¹

Carter’s response was less revealing for its content than its brevity. The president noted that, while he respected the military judgement of the

²¹⁹ Letter, Robert B. Carney, Arleigh A. Burke, George Anderson, and Thomas H. Moorer to President Carter, 8 June, 1977, folder “FO 3-1/Panama Canal 8/30/77,” Box FO16, WHCF – Subject File, *JCL*.

²²⁰ Letter, Strom Thurmond, John L. McClure, Jesse Helms, and Harry F. Byrd Jr. to President Carter, 15 June, 1977, folder “FO 3-1/Panama Canal 8/30/77,” Box FO16, WHCF – Subject File, *JCL*.

²²¹ Jesse Helms (NC), “Former Chiefs Of Naval Operations Ask President To Retain Sovereignty In Panama Canal Zone,” *Cong. Rec.* 123 (1977), 21923.

chiefs, and agreed that the Canal ‘retains strategic and commercial importance for the United States’, the chances of preserving ‘un-fettered access to the canal’ were ‘poor’ without alterations to the status quo.²²² Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s national security adviser, had informed those in charge of drafting the response that responding in detail to Helms was a waste of time. In handwritten annotations to a memo on the topic, Brzezinski wrote, ‘I think the letter should be only a paragraph and the arguments saved for more worthwhile targets’.²²³

It was an early indication that the senator’s strident criticism rendered him largely irrelevant to a White House seeking to court more moderate senators in its quest for ratification. In December, Carter’s political advisers made it abundantly clear that Helms would not figure in the administration’s strategy on the treaties. Helms, they surmised, along with Senators Allen, Harry Byrd Jr., Stennis, Bartlett, Curtis, Dole, Garn, Hansen, Hatch, Laxalt, McClure, Scott, Thurmond, Tower, and Wallop, ‘would support [the treaties] only with amendments unacceptable to Panama or would not support under any condition’. The recommendation was blunt: ‘No further contact planned.’²²⁴ Alongside Carter’s diary entry for 9 August, in which he described Helms as one of a handful of Canal ‘nuts’, Brzezinski’s earlier assessment indicated that even before the new treaties had been signed, the senator was considered undeserving of attention from the administration.²²⁵

²²² Letter, President Carter to Jesse Helms, 20 July, 1977, folder “FO 3-1/Panama Canal 8/30/77,” Box FO16, WHCF – Subject File, *JCL*.

²²³ Memo, Robert A. Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 13 July, 1977, folder “FO 3-1/Panama Canal 8/30/77,” Box FO16, WHCF – Subject File, *JCL*.

²²⁴ Memo, Douglas J. Bennett, Jr., Robert Beckel, and Robert Thomson to Hamilton Jordan and Frank Moore, 1 December, 1977, folder “FO 3-1/Panama Canal 11/1/77 – 1/20/81,” Box FO15, WHCF – Subject File, *JCL*.

²²⁵ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 159.

Helms' reliance on retired officers stemmed from conservative suspicion that the administration was stifling honest analysis among the active military leadership. Accusations of a duplicitous, or at least gagged, military became an important part of the senator's narrative, and fuelled acrimonious exchanges during the ratification debate. In the meantime, the senator used the letter sent by the chiefs themselves as a foundation for subsequent attacks on the current military's judgement over the Canal.²²⁶ 'We all know that officers on active duty are under obligation to give their military advice based upon the given circumstances', he remarked in October. 'If their Commander in Chief has already made a political decision, they must shape their advice to the given circumstances, and make their military proposals accordingly.' They were not 'any less loyal than other Americans', but had to take into consideration other issues. The former chiefs, on the other hand, had been 'an inspiration' to the American people and former officers, too, in their courage in coming forward.²²⁷

If a large part of the conservative anti-Treaties campaign was based on a broad faith in the historical generosity of American actions in the Zone, so too did another critical issue in Helms' efforts emerge out of a wider national sentiment. The senator's interest in Panama's involvement in hemispheric drug trafficking was one facet of a growing national furore over the impact of drugs on U.S. society. Carter described the drugs issue as 'an entirely new attack' on the treaties, but opponents of negotiations had already used allegations about the Torrijos government's complicity in international drug smuggling to undermine negotiations with Panama.²²⁸ In

²²⁶ Daniel Flood had used Helms' letter in his own remarks on 30 June to express his concern that current officers were being restrained by the administration in offering their honest military opinions. Daniel Flood (PA), "U.S. Canal Zone And Panama Canal: Former Chiefs Of Naval Operations Urge Retention Of Full Sovereign Control," *Cong. Rec.* 123 (1977), 21694.

²²⁷ Jesse Helms (NC), "Three Hundred And Twenty U.S. Military Leaders Oppose Panama Canal Treaties," *Cong. Rec.* 123 (1977), 35214-35215.

²²⁸ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 167.

1972, Rep. John Murphy (D-NY) had launched an investigation into connections between senior officials in the Panamanian government and hemispheric narcotics smuggling. His report concluded that General Torrijos' brother, Moises Torrijos, and Panama's foreign minister Juan Tack were intimately involved in large-scale drug trafficking through Panama. The United States and Panamanian governments declared the allegations to be unfounded, but anti-Treaties campaigners seized upon the findings as evidence of the corrupt, unstable, and immoral character of the Panamanian government.²²⁹

The issue resurfaced in Autumn 1977 when Helms and the Senate Steering Committee as well as fiery House conservatives Robert Dornan (R-CA) and Robert Lagomarsino (R-CA) wrote individually to the Department of Justice demanding information about the Torrijos family's links to drug trafficking. Robert Pastor, the National Security Council's primary expert on Latin America, was so concerned about the potential fallout from the public disclosure of what he had been told was an 'extremely sensitive' Moises Torrijos indictment that he advised the Justice Department to avoid handing over any information. Particularly concerned about Dornan exploiting the issue to destroy the treaties, Pastor warned his contact at Justice that the congressman 'would probably do anything to see them defeated.'²³⁰

Pastor was astute in recognising the drugs issue posed dangers for the administration. Even before it was formally discussed in the Senate,

²²⁹ Jesse W. Lewis, "Drugs Report Hits Talk On Panama," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 17 March 1972, C10, Benjamin Welles, "House Members Charges Narcotics Smuggling Inquiry Touches "Highest Levels" of Panama Government," *The New York Times*, 16 March, 1972, 14, Jack Anderson, "Drug Report Names Panamanians," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 14 March, 1972, B13, and Karen DeYoung and Marlise Simons, *Washington Post*, "Panama Embittered by Drug Allegations," 13 November, 1977, A27.

²³⁰ Memorandum for the files, Robert Pastor, 10 October 1977, folder "Panama Canal - 1990-," Box 94, Vertical File, JCL.

Human Events informed its readers in October 1977 that concerns about hemispheric drug trafficking through Panama ‘just might mean the permanent defeat of the canal treaties.’²³¹ M. Stanton Evans, a bellwether for Helmsian positions on Central America throughout the period, followed up with a November piece that declared drugs, and an apparent White House cover-up, ‘threaten to blow the lid of an already explosive debate on the Panama Canal.’²³²

Under concerted pressure from conservatives led by Helms and Bob Dole (R-KS), the White House agreed to release classified intelligence on the drugs issue to the Senate Select Intelligence Committee. At the start of the New Year, with Dole tenaciously following up on the issue, the administration’s allies in the Senate reluctantly agreed to a special hearing on the drugs question.²³³ Carter later blamed Dole and Helms for leading the calls for this closed session, which occurred behind closed doors during the Senate debate on the Neutrality Treaty.²³⁴

The session provided a chance for Helms and congressional conservatives to persuade colleagues of the substance and relevance of the drugs allegations. Yet from the outset, Helms adopted a confrontational and inflexible approach. Having worked in harmony with fellow anti-Treaties senators from his first days in the Senate, he now confounded supporters and opponents alike with a display of procedural intransigence that began with his objection to the numbers of staff present who supported the new

²³¹ “This Week’s News from Inside Washington,” *Human Events*, 29 October, 1977, 3.

²³² M. Stanton Evans, “Torrijos’ Drug Connections Should Be Probed By Congress,” *Human Events*, 5 November, 1977, 13.

²³³ M. Stanton Evans, “Cover-Up of Torrijos Drug Trafficking,” *Human Events*, 28 January, 1978, 7, M. Stanton Evans, “Carter Cover-Ups Continue,” *Human Events*, 14 January, 1978, 7, and “This Week’s News From Inside Washington,” *Human Events*, 7 January, 1978, 3.

²³⁴ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 167.

Canal agreements. Indeed, by casting the sole dissenting vote on granting the privilege of the floor to staff members, Helms set about delaying a hearing he had himself long sought.²³⁵

It was a tactic that baffled those in favour of the treaties, but also several sympathetic conservatives. Those in charge of the Senate's intelligence committee, including Barry Goldwater, criticised Helms for threatening to deny the chamber the expertise of knowledgeable staffers.²³⁶ When Helms switched tactics and began complaining about the presence of Foreign Relations Committee aides, Goldwater expressed bewilderment. 'I cannot see what effect that will have on our disclosure of secret material regarding the Torrijos family', the Arizona conservative said. 'I honestly cannot follow the Senator. He knows that he and I are not too far apart in the same camp.'²³⁷ Bob Dole agreed, stating it was vital to have knowledgeable staff.²³⁸ For those wanting to hear more on the drugs issue, like South Carolina Democrat Ernest Hollings, Helms' strategy was depriving the Senate of valuable discussion time. 'Let us get on with Omar, and hear something about him', Hollings demanded. 'We have been wrangling about rules, rules, and staff; we are going to kill the day here.'²³⁹

Critics, both then and later, often accused the senator of a knowing contrarianism.²⁴⁰ Helms understood that an intimate knowledge of the Senate's rulebook was vital in maximising leverage on a particular issue. Knowing when and how to push back against the majority, which he had

²³⁵ Jesse Helms (NC), "Closed Session," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 3967.

²³⁶ Barry Goldwater (AZ), "Closed Session," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 3967.

²³⁷ Goldwater, "Closed Session," 3967.

²³⁸ Robert Dole (KS), "Closed Session," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 3967.

²³⁹ Ernest Hollings (SC), "Closed Session," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 3970.

²⁴⁰ Hersman, *Friends and Foe*, 88, and Christopher Hitchens, "Farewell to the Helmsman," *Foreign Policy* 126 (September – October, 2001), 68.

learned from studying those he considered the great parliamentarians of his era, was a cornerstone of his approach toward Central America policy over the next decade.²⁴¹ In this case, his colleagues failed to appreciate Helms' ploy was not designed to obstruct the hearing so much as gain greater access to the Senate's information. To bring the delay to an end, Helms' colleagues agreed to have his senior foreign policy assistant, Jim Lucier, attend the hearing, thereby drawing the senator's private staff more closely into the process.²⁴²

Lucier, described as the senator's 'intellectual director', had strong connections to the anti-Treaties community, not least through his previous employment in Strom Thurmond's office and academic contributions to the debate about the Canal's future.²⁴³ There were strong objections to Lucier's inclusion given he lacked the appropriate security authorisation, but Robert Byrd was forced by Helms' inflexibility to grant Lucier floor privileges on the understanding that he sign the necessary waivers.²⁴⁴

More puzzling to those who expected Helms to play a vocal part in the hearings was the senator's almost complete absence from the subsequent discussion. The senator, his congressional allies, and the conservative press described the session as persuasive and incriminating. *Human Events* told its readers that 'many believe the information that surfaced cannot help the administration, and may eventually jettison the treaties', and devoted

²⁴¹ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 135 -136.

²⁴² Howard Baker (TN), "Closed Session," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 3969.

²⁴³ Furgurson, *Hard Right*, 191. Helms had already demonstrated a reliance on Lucier's analysis of Panamanian issues. In March 1975, he inserted a *Strategic Review* article by Lucier, "Panama Canal: Focus of Power Politics", into the record. At the time, he noted his pride at Lucier's place as his chief legislative assistant. Jesse Helms, "'Senate Resolution 97 - Submission Of A Resolution Urging Retention Of Undiluted U.S. Sovereignty Over The Canal Zone," *Cong. Rec.* 121 (1975), 5076.

²⁴⁴ Robert Byrd (WV), "Closed Session," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 3969.

considerable attention to Helms' comments that the links between the Torrijos government and drug trafficking were much stronger than suggested by the declassified, but redacted report.²⁴⁵ Yet with the exception of a brief interjection on classified intelligence sources, Helms did not contribute to the closed session.²⁴⁶ Indeed, he was not even present for the second part of the hearings, and relied on Bob Dole to follow up on the covert sources.²⁴⁷

Helms' disengagement derived from his opposition to the closed format of the hearing, and his wider aversion to secretive deliberations within government. The American people, he declared, 'are entitled to hear what may be said here.'²⁴⁸ He warned his colleagues on the day before the closed session that such hearings limited the public's ability to form their own conclusions on matters of policy, and presented himself as the guardian of open democracy.²⁴⁹ It was a continuation of his criticism of secretive Kissingerian diplomacy, which he believed had undermined the morality, accountability, and responsibility of previous administrations. In fact, Helms went further this time, drawing a comparison to the controversial investigation into President Kennedy's assassination:

²⁴⁵ "Closed Senate Session Damaging to Torrijos," *Human Events*, 4 March, 1978, 1 and 6.

²⁴⁶ Bayh told the second day of the closed session that, in deference to Helms, intelligence committee members and their staff had checked the sources and confirmed the committee's analysis. Birch Bayh (IN), "The Panama Canal Treaties," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 4121.

²⁴⁷ Bob Dole (KS), "The Panama Canal Treaties," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 4121, and "Quorum Call," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 4104.

²⁴⁸ Helms, "Closed Session," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 3967, and Helms, "Treaty Concerning The Permanent Neutrality And Operation Of The Panama Canal," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 4145.

²⁴⁹ Helms, "Treaty Concerning The Permanent Neutrality And Operation Of The Panama Canal," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 3809.

We have seen in the fruits of the Warren Commission the distrust and uncertainty which such procedure breeds when it is applied to deeply felt, emotional issues. There must be no hint of coverup, no suggestion that secrecy has been imposed to silence politically damaging revelations.²⁵⁰

In the post-Watergate and post-Vietnam era, as well as in the wake of the highly publicised Church hearings into CIA misconduct, the senator's charges played on the theme of a government divorced from, and even pitted against, the American people.²⁵¹ Ironically, it was just such a sentiment, alongside a renewed conservative moralistic and religious zeal, that partly explained Carter's successful 1976 presidential campaign.²⁵²

Helms, however, found little sympathy in the Senate. Many supported a selected release of non-sensitive findings about drugs in Panama, but only Helms consistently sought full disclosure, and his zeal irritated even those within the anti-Treaties community. Jake Garn (R-UT), as ardent an opponent of the new treaties as there was in the Senate, surely had Helms in mind when he reflected in the midst of the drugs debate that:

I would particularly caution my colleagues who opposed these treaties not to be so zealous in attempts to defeat them that we start revealing any possibility of sources and methods. I would

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Lock K. Johnson, "Congressional Supervision of America's Secret Agencies: The Experience and Legacy of the Church Committee," *Public Administration Review* 64, No. 1 (January-February, 2004), 3-14.

²⁵² Melanson, *American Foreign Policy*, 88, Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 260, and Kevin Phillips, *Post-Conservative America: People, Politics, and Ideology in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Random House, 1982), 49.

like to see the treaties defeated, but not in any way that endangers the security of this country.²⁵³

The senator's populist sentiments on the drugs issue were closely associated with his concerns about the domestic impact of illegal narcotics. In remarks immediately following the closed sitting, he attacked those colleagues who considered the drugs issue irrelevant: 'tell that to the people of the United States, and mothers and fathers whose children are hooked on heroin. Do not just say it here in this Senate Chamber. Tell it to the parents. Tell it to the addicts themselves.' The link between Panama and drug trafficking, the senator concluded, 'is the most relevant thing we can talk about.'²⁵⁴ He repeated these sentiments to journalists in the aftermath of the secret session.²⁵⁵

In the end, the drugs question proved little more than a sideshow to the treaties debate. Its failure to unify conservatives was partly responsible for its reduced visibility. James Burnham, who, alongside William Buckley, represented the core of the conservative community in favour of new agreements with Panama, concluded that those emphasising the drugs question were simply manipulating the agenda for their own benefit.²⁵⁶ At the same time, insufficient engagement from those senators who attended the sessions on drug trafficking rendered the issue inert. Despite the pleas of Helms and his allies, there was little interest in the matter among those who would ultimately decide the fate of the treaties. The ratification debate

²⁵³ Jake Garn (UT), "The Panama Canal Treaties," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 3970.

²⁵⁴ Helms, "Treaty Concerning The Permanent Neutrality And Operation Of The Panama Canal," *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 4145.

²⁵⁵ Robert G. Kaiser, "Treaties Pass 1st Test," *Washington Post*, 23 February, 1978, A1.

²⁵⁶ James Burnham, "The Canal: Interim Notes," *National Review*, 25 November, 1977, 1351.

would instead be fought over ground that Helms had laid out over nearly seven years of anti-Treaties activism.

Helms' vote in the ratification process for the Panama Canal Treaties was never likely to be courted by the Carter administration. Knowing full well that the senator was resolutely opposed to the treaties, unless they contained amendments unacceptable to Panama, the president and his advisers did not waste time or political capital attempting to curry Helms' favour during the intense scramble for votes. Instead, the president and his advisers devoted their efforts to those senators who remained undecided and open to persuasion. This was a recurring limitation on Helms' impact on Central America policy: where legislation was closely contested, with swing votes acting as the critical determinant in whether a bill would pass the Senate, Helms was seldom courted by administrations who almost always knew which side of an issue his vote would be cast for.

Nor did Helms fundamentally change the substance of the debate during the ratification debate. The previous waves of anti-treaties sentiment crafted the narrative for opponents of the agreements, and while they spoke with increasing fervour as the date of the vote drew ever closer, more often than not the issues were those long articulated and long contested. The debate was certainly historic in length and outreach – ten weeks in total, from 8 February to 18 April, broadcast on National Public Radio – but it was strikingly repetitious.²⁵⁷

However, the ratification debate was the final surge in the anti-treaties campaign, and, for Helms, it represented the moment when the intensity of his message reached its peak. This was particularly evident in his recounting of the Rooseveltian narrative, to which he devoted himself as the debate wore on. '[M]any things about these debates have been dismaying to many Americans,' Helms told his colleagues as the Senate

²⁵⁷ Clymer, *Drawing the Line*, 104-105.

discussed the treaties, ‘none more so than various implications impugning the conduct of President Theodore Roosevelt in connection with the acquisition of the land and the construction of the Panama Canal.’ Referring to Roosevelt’s *Fear God and Take Your Own Part*, Helms declared the former president had warned future generations about how to respond when faced with decisions like those presently before the Senate: ‘You had better look after the United States. You had better look after the free world.’ Summing up his ideal for policy in Panama, the senator succinctly declared that ‘I wish we had a Teddy Roosevelt today.’²⁵⁸

His debate rhetoric was not the only means of giving his message a final push. Several amendments that were designed to reinforce the substance of themes long presented by opponents of the agreements acted as beacons for the conservative agenda in Panama, and more generally in foreign policy. Among the senator’s attempted additions to the treaties were amendments that called for a continued American presence at the Galeta Island military facility, the right for the United States to unilaterally intervene in order to defend the Canal, and the toll-free transit of U.S. warships and their support craft.²⁵⁹

To supporters of the treaties, Helms’ amendments were dismissed as little more than uninformed, pernicious “bomb throwing”. Responding to the Galeta Island amendment, which Helms described as critical if the U.S. was to maintain its top-secret SOSUS anti-submarine listening network, Frank Church acerbically concluded, ‘When I first heard about the Galeta facility the descriptions of it were so lurid that I thought we must have

²⁵⁸ Helms, “Treaty Concerning The Permanent Neutrality And Operation Of The Panama Canal,” *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 4905-4906.

²⁵⁹ Jesse Helms (NC), “Up Amendment No. 4 to Panama Canal Neutrality Treaty,” *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 5780, Jesse Helms (NC), “Up Amendment No. 27 to Panama Canal Neutrality Treaty,” *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 6398, and Jesse Helms (NC), “Up Amendment No. 9 to Panama Canal Neutrality Treaty,” *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 6548.

installed on this island the most secret and advanced of all possible devices, on which the very life of the Republic might hinge.’ Instead, as Church noted, the Navy had assessed the base as strategically unnecessary.²⁶⁰ John Culver, the Iowa Democrat, concluded the issue was ‘a red herring pickled in misinformation and seasoned with scare tactics.’²⁶¹

Yet the accuracy, or success, of the senator’s amendments was beside the point. Their worth was in acting as waypoints for conservatives, who could identify movement advocates in Congress by the votes attached to each amendment. They also served as another means of articulating the foreign policy vision that Helms and conservatives represented, using specific issues as a way of identifying their larger concerns (and proposing solutions – however untenable these might be). It was through these amendments, along with the more general rhetoric during the ratification debate, that Helms solidified his reputation as a leading movement conservative.

After frenetic efforts to secure the necessary votes for the agreements, Jimmy Carter succeeded in passing the Panama Canal Treaties. Yet it was, as George Moffett summarised, one of the great Pyrrhic victories of American foreign policy.²⁶² Carter won the battle for Panama, but lost the war over the nation’s foreign policy. Administration figures consoled themselves by declaring that the treaties righted a historical wrong, alleviated regional insecurity, and demonstrated national character.²⁶³ The American public, however, saw the new agreements as emblematic of

²⁶⁰ Frank Church (ID), “Treaty Concerning The Permanent Neutrality And Operation Of The Panama Canal,” *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 5789.

²⁶¹ John Culver (IA), “Treaty Concerning The Permanent Neutrality And Operation Of The Panama Canal,” *Cong. Rec.* 124 (1978), 5800.

²⁶² Moffett III, *The Limits of Victory*, 11.

²⁶³ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 184-185, Vance, *Hard Choices*, 156-157, Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 145.

broader policy failures at home and abroad, and Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 signified the end of Carter's hopes of constructing a new Democratic national security strategy.²⁶⁴ Reagan's more aggressively Manichean anti-communism, albeit tempered in the future by a political pragmatism that frustrated Helms and movement conservatives, would define the foreign policy environment of the 1980s.²⁶⁵

Political commentators and scholars recognise the critical role that the Panama Canal Treaties played in Reagan's successful 1980 campaign. Jesse Helms' role has been correctly placed within a broader conservative coalition on Panama policy, but a close examination of his record on the Canal sheds further light on the evolution of post-war conservative foreign policy. Instead of being a product of a post-Vietnam breakdown in a supposed national foreign policy consensus, Helms' opposition to the Canal Treaties emerged from a chauvinistic, outward-looking conservative foreign policy agenda already present in the first-wave oppositionism of the late 1950s to early 1970s. A short-1970s framework explains the intensification of conservative activism in the second half of that decade, but it neglects this pre-existing sentiment.

Not all members of the post-war right embraced Helms' conservative vision for Panama. Though modern conservatives found unity in their opposition to President Carter's foreign policy, the fate of the Panama Canal also revealed the propensity for conservatives to split over practicalities. *National Review's* spearheading of pro-Treaties conservatism, and to a lesser extent Barry Goldwater's wavering position throughout the Canal debate, indicated that conservatives did not find it easy to reconcile differences while in opposition. It was to be a harbinger of future disagreements among conservatives when in power.

²⁶⁴ Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy*, 298.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 300-303, and Kalman, *Right Star Rising*, 363-366.

The senator's Panama policy also revealed important elements of his approach to policy entrepreneurship, although his strategy during the Canal negotiations was not entirely one of daring individualism in the face of overwhelming opposition. Unlike in subsequent years, the senator primarily operated within a larger network of congressional conservatives, and worked (nearly always) in harmony with the group's objectives and tactics in mind.

Still, some particulars do emerge. Firstly, it was clear that Helms perceived the exchange of accurate and relevant information to be a critical component of a successful policy strategy. For the senator, public remarks – whether in the Senate, on the campaign trail, or through the media – were a vital means of shaping public perceptions on a given issue. At a time when networks of information among non-governmental actors were becoming easier to construct and sustain, owing to rapid developments in mass communication and travel, Helms helped challenge three successive administrations and their official narrative on the Panama Canal. He did so by drawing on ideas and evidence collected from a wider network of conservative anti-Treaties campaigners.²⁶⁶ Matthews accounts for this kind of test of administration information dominance as a post-Cold War phenomenon, but it is clear that during the Panama debates in the 1970s an organised and highly effective challenge to official narratives was testing the traditional deference afforded to government accounts.²⁶⁷

Secondly, Helms' Panama campaign can be considered a training ground for his later efforts to craft, alter, or resist foreign policy initiatives. These were not frequent, nor did they succeed in altering the objectives of policy. This would seem to validate Hinckley's argument that Congress finds it difficult to resist long-term policy momentum. Yet each legislative

²⁶⁶ Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, 14.

²⁶⁷ Matthews, "Power Shift," 51.

act not only enhanced the senator's position within the conservative movement, it also affected the broader foreign policy environment of the 1970s. In the longer term, Helms' tactics contributed to the congressional assertiveness that forced Nixon and Ford to move negotiations away from Congress and the public, and which in turn weakened Carter's ability to implement his own policy vision. They also played on ideas of executive secrecy, and ultimately helped to forge the view of Carter as a weak, ineffective leader.

Robert Strong, in his sympathetic analysis of Carter's foreign policy, has noted that the president suffered because a number of his international policies were either unpopular (such as the Panama Canal Treaties) or became caught up in long-standing controversies (for example, détente and the Middle East).²⁶⁸ What Helms achieved in Panama was to combine these two forces, to successfully incorporate long-standing populist concerns about the surrender of a historical legacy in Panama with contemporary apprehension over the re-ordering of Cold War priorities. The Canal thus became a political hindrance to Carter (as well as Nixon and Ford) because Helms helped to move the issue beyond the confines of bilateral Panama policy and into the wider framework of the nation's national security agenda in the 1970s.

He did so by demonstrating issue leadership, all the way through the decade. Other congressional figures spoke more frequently on the Canal (Flood, Thurmond, Murphy, for example), but it was widely recognised by advocates and opponents alike that the senator excelled in framing the debate. Cyrus Vance, attempting to explain the nation's political sentiments shifted rightwards as the 1970s closed, argued it was:

²⁶⁸ Robert A. Strong, *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 262.

more a reflection of national frustration and anger at the growing complexity and intractability of political, economic, and social issues than it was the product of an anxiety generated by the Panama Canal Treaties that saw them as a symbol of national “decline.”²⁶⁹

Like many others in the administration, Vance underestimated the power of the Canal, and of its relevance to conservatives. Jesse Helms did not. By recognising and crafting public perceptions throughout the decade, the senator made a vital contribution to the narrative of resurgence that Ronald Reagan would lead on as the United States approached Central America policy in the 1980s.

²⁶⁹ Vance, *Hard Choices*, 157.

Nicaragua, 1979-1984

During the eight years of his presidency, Ronald Reagan made a vocal commitment to the rollback of perceived communist expansion around the world. This strategy, dubbed the “Reagan Doctrine” by Charles Krauthammer, underpinned the U.S. response to several foreign policy crises that Reagan encountered as president.²⁷⁰ In Nicaragua, the Reagan Doctrine was used to justify the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars to support Contra forces engaged in a bitter civil war against the leftist Sandinista government. The war against the Sandinistas, who ascended to power in the aftermath of the 1979 Nicaraguan Revolution that toppled the right-wing, authoritarian government of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, would be the Reagan administration’s most publicised, and most polarising, foreign policy initiative.²⁷¹

The president’s commitment to the Contra cause has been well documented.²⁷² Yet authorship of the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua

²⁷⁰ Krauthammer, “The Reagan Doctrine.”

²⁷¹ The literature on U.S. policy in Nicaragua during the late Cold War is extensive. See Roy Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy: The Making of American Policy in Nicaragua, 1981-1987* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977-1990* (London: Free Press, 1996), Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1991), R. Pardo-Maurer, *The Contras, 1980-1989: A Special Kind of Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1990), Robert A. Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), and E. Bradford Burns, *At War in Nicaragua: The Reagan Doctrine and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

²⁷² The president consistently extolled the virtues of the rebels. For examples, see “Question-and-Answer Session With Reporters on Domestic and Foreign Policy Issues, 4 May, 1983,” *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, accessed 18 November, 2012, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/50483d.htm>, “Radio Address to the Nation on United States Assistance for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance, 22 March, 1986,” *The Public Papers of*

belonged not only to the president and his senior advisers, but also to a wide network of anti-Sandinista individuals across the Americas. Helms served as a focal point for this community, and his links to such figures as Jeane Kirkpatrick, Oliver North, John Carbaugh, Nat Hamrick, Gerardo Schamis, and Lewis Tambs, as well as his framing of the Contra cause contributed substantially to the evolution of policy toward Nicaragua. Though Helms' level of engagement in the hemispheric anti-Sandinista network fluctuated, he remained involved from the initial response to the 1979 revolution through to the final stages of the Contra programme in the late 1980s.

Helms' success was partly a product of the wider context of post-Vietnam congressional resurgence, and further Cold War discord between supporters of détente and those conservatives preaching a more militarised international agenda, that created spaces for individual lawmakers to influence policy.²⁷³ Helms located and took advantage of these spaces more effectively than many of his congressional colleagues, and he recognised the importance of committee assignments, personnel appointments, and legislation in achieving influence. Crucially, he also astutely perceived that he could gain more say in foreign policy by also working outside these more traditional avenues. Thus he permitted independence among staff, and connected with many anti-Sandinista contacts across the hemisphere who provided information as well as access to the implementation of policy.

President Ronald W. Reagan, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, accessed 17 October, 2012, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/32286a.htm>, and "Address to the Nation on Aid to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance, 2 February, 1988," *The Public Papers of Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, accessed 16 October, 2012, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1988/020288e.htm>.

²⁷³ Carter and Scott, *Choosing to Lead*, 115, and Melanson, *American Foreign Policy*, 4.

This is not to argue that the senator achieved continuous success. His reputation for intransigence and obstructionism often left him with only a handful of allies during many of the debates over Nicaragua. Likewise, his polemical articulation of anti-Sandinista policy was frequently at odds with a public that oscillated between indifference and hostility toward the Contras. These difficulties did not prevent the senator from influencing the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua, and in fact served to highlight the fact that Helms was often more effective when operating outside the traditional avenues of influence available to lawmakers within a democratically-elected government. His use of less obvious policy conduits explains his largely obscured role within U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, but by examining the combination of such approaches with his more public initiatives, it can be argued that Helms was an important part of the wider anti-Sandinista community that helped forge the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua.

Somoza and the Sandinistas, 1979-1980

For more than forty years, the Somoza family dominated Nicaragua's political life. Beginning in the mid-1930s, when the United States removed its marines from the country and promoted Anastasio Somoza García to head the National Guard, the family occupied the highest levels of power in Nicaragua. Somoza García's fraudulent election to president in 1937 started decades of *Somocista* rule in which *Somocismo*, a system of an intense anti-communism and commitment to free-market capitalism, protected the family's power and promoted an internal stability that appealed to a United States in search of Cold War hemispheric allies. Yet its authoritarian power structures relied on a repressive state security apparatus, while the economy's foundations were undermined by rampant corruption that filled the Somozas' personal fortunes.

In the 1970s, when Somoza García's second son, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, led the country, discontented Nicaraguans from across the

political spectrum challenged *Somocismo*. Somoza's embezzlement of international aid relief following a major earthquake in 1972 intensified the opposition, but it was the 1978 murder of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, editor of the opposition newspaper *La Prensa*, that sparked a national uprising. The *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN, or Sandinistas), a communist revolutionary movement founded in 1961, spearheaded military attacks across Nicaragua in support of the rebellion. The Sandinistas emerged as the dominant faction within the forces arrayed against Somoza and, after their successful "Final Offensive" in 1979, took control of Nicaragua's post-Somoza government.²⁷⁴

It was this offensive that first caused Helms to concentrate on Nicaragua. His relatively late entrance reflected a degree of conservative complacency about Somoza's future. Through a skilful manipulation of the disjointed diplomatic strategy being pursued by the White House, by 1979 Somoza had marginalised moderate opponents and left Carter with no seemingly credible alternative to *Somocismo*. Thus, while conservatives remained wary in early 1979, they nevertheless believed Somoza and his National Guard had successfully headed off the worst of the crisis.²⁷⁵

When renewed instability imperilled the Somoza government in the spring, Helms adopted a two-pronged rhetorical strategy that largely reflected the conservative consensus on both Nicaragua and Carter's approach to American foreign policy more broadly. Firstly, though offering

²⁷⁴ For histories of Nicaragua during the Somoza dynasty, see Andrew Crawley, *Somoza and Roosevelt: Good Neighbour Diplomacy in Nicaragua, 1933-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Thomas W. Walker, *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003), Paul Coe Clark, *The United States and Somoza, 1933-1956: A Revisionist Look* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), Michael D. Gambone, *Eisenhower, Somoza, and the Cold War in Nicaragua, 1953-1961* (Westport: Praeger, 1997), and Knut Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza, 1936-1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

²⁷⁵ Martin Arostegui, "Central America's Guerrillas Aren't Robin Hoods," *Human Events*, 31 March, 1979, 11.

a muted acknowledgement of Somoza's failings, Helms defended the Nicaraguan government and its record as an American ally. Secondly, the senator dismissed any suggestion that the insurrection was a populist, indigenous rebellion by focusing on the Sandinistas' human rights record and their links to international communism.

First and foremost, Helms saw a *Somocista* Nicaragua as an ally of the United States. Three years before the crisis of 1979, the senator had lauded Nicaragua as being among those Latin American countries 'traditionally friendly toward the U.S.'²⁷⁶ At the height of the Nicaraguan Revolution, the senator again emphasised the historic alliance between the two nations. Writing to President Carter in June, Helms joined several conservative senators in noting it was 'beyond question' that Nicaragua had been 'unfailingly friendly and cooperative' toward the U.S.²⁷⁷

This argument was a foreign policy shibboleth among American conservatives. Like the Iranian Shah, facing his own internal crisis at the time, Somoza's Nicaragua was seen as a bastion of pro-American sentiment in a world threatened by advancing international communism. James C. Roberts, former executive director of the American Conservative Union, called Somoza 'an ardent fan of the United States'.²⁷⁸ M. Stanton Evans spoke with approval of Nicaragua's pro-U.S. foreign policy and its free-enterprise economy.²⁷⁹ Patrick Buchanan, the firebrand commentator and former Nixon aide, commended Somoza as a dependable friend of the

²⁷⁶ Helms, "A New Policy," 19.

²⁷⁷ Letter, Senators Jesse Helms, Strom Thurmond, James McClure, Orrin Hatch, Gordon Humphrey, and Roger Jepson to President Carter, 21 June, 1979, folder "Executive - 8/1/79 - 1/20/81", Box 47, WHCF - CO114, JCL.

²⁷⁸ James C. Roberts, "Nicaragua: A Much-Maligned Friend," *Human Events*, 10 December, 1977, 10.

²⁷⁹ M. Stanton Evans, "U.S. Makes Enemies Of Friends," *Human Events*, 22 April, 1978, 11.

United States.²⁸⁰ Other conservatives defended Nicaragua as, variously, a 'relatively mild authoritarian state friendly to the United States' and 'a major anti-Marxist bastion' in the region.²⁸¹

While he understood the benefits of *Somocista* Nicaragua, Helms was not ignorant of its faults. The Somoza government, Helms conceded, had its 'demerits'.²⁸² 'I am sure that if I were a Nicaraguan, living in Nicaragua,' he told the Senate, 'I would find much to criticize.'²⁸³ Nor, he claimed, did he especially care whether Somoza himself continued as Nicaragua's leader. Unlike members of the pro-Somoza lobby in the House of Representatives – the self-proclaimed 'Dirty Thirty' – the senator had no long-standing friendship with the dictator.²⁸⁴ 'I hold no brief for President Somoza', Helms argued, echoing the sentiment of other conservatives, notably Pat Buchanan, who recognised the dangers of too close an association with the beleaguered dictator.²⁸⁵

Nevertheless, Helms did not fall within that category of conservatives who actually did criticise several specific aspects of the Somoza government. William Buckley, who had also differed with the senator over the Panama Canal Treaties, readily acknowledged Somoza's corruption and propensity to bomb urban population centres in response

²⁸⁰ Patrick J. Buchanan, "Nicaragua: Making Enemies of Friends," *Human Events*, 21 October, 1978, 16.

²⁸¹ Belden Bell, "The PLO Is At Work Subverting Latin America," *Human Events*, 25 November, 1978, 14, and Robert S. Strother, "Reprieve for Nicaragua," *National Review*, 27 October, 1978, 1365.

²⁸² Jesse Helms (NC), "The Importance of Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 15867.

²⁸³ Jesse Helms (NC), "The Resignation Of President Somoza," *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 18947.

²⁸⁴ Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 193.

²⁸⁵ Helms, "The Resignation Of President Somoza," *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 18948, and Buchanan, "Making Enemies of Friends in Nicaragua," 16.

to internal opposition.²⁸⁶ Even Jeane Kirkpatrick, the Georgetown professor of political science and outspoken neoconservative whose November 1979 article “Dictatorships and Double Standards” would become a seminal text in the evolution of modern conservative foreign policy, described a ruler whose fortune was ‘no doubt appropriated from general revenues’ and whose people ‘only intermittently enjoyed the rights accorded to citizens in the Western democracies’.²⁸⁷

Instead, Helms’ inability to specifically condemn the Somoza government fitted into that thinking best exemplified by *Human Events*’ belated and ambiguous acknowledgement that Somoza ‘may have been an unappetizing ruler from certain points of view, and not all of them left-wing’.²⁸⁸ Such flaws, however, were not that important in the grand scheme of things for Helms, given the benefits of *Somocismo* to the United States. When Helms told the American public he held ‘no brief’ for the dictator, he did so under the proviso that ‘I do hold a brief for stability, order, and freedom.’²⁸⁹

For Helms, whatever Somoza’s flaws, Nicaragua’s current government embodied these three pillars. Helms saw a leader ‘legitimately elected, under a Constitution that is perfectly adequate’ who provided ‘a stable political structure’ for his country.²⁹⁰ Somoza ‘represented no ideology’,

²⁸⁶ William F. Buckley, Jr., “Nicaragua,” *National Review*, 6 July, 1979, 846.

²⁸⁷ Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” *Commentary*, 1 November, 1979, accessed 5 July, 2012, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/dictatorships-double-standards>.

²⁸⁸ “Communists Poised To Take Over Nicaragua,” *Human Events*, 28 July, 1979, 3.

²⁸⁹ Helms, “The Resignation Of President Somoza,” *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 18948.

²⁹⁰ Helms, “The Importance Of Nicaragua,” *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 15867-15868.

and worked within ‘a legal framework, a constitutional structure with significant elements of democracy, economic progress, and political stability.’ This produced a system of ‘institutional structures that were fundamentally sound’, especially when compared to neighbouring countries and others in the Third World.²⁹¹ Like congressman John Murphy, who remarked to senior State Department officials that “‘I know what democracy is, and Somoza practises democracy’”, Helms believed Nicaragua to be a functioning democratic state.²⁹²

Nicaragua’s democratic credentials were hardly a matter of consensus among conservatives. Those who joined Helms in regarding Somoza as a legitimate leader broke with the analysis of Kirkpatrick who, in “Dictatorships and Double Standards”, reminded Americans that Somoza had never achieved a popular mandate. The Nicaraguan, she wrote, had not deemed it necessary to ‘submit... to searching tests of popular acceptability’ and his government ‘had never rested on popular will.’²⁹³ Instead of the more affirming narrative of electoral freedom set out by the senator, Kirkpatrick concluded that Nicaraguans stoically accepted the familiar socio-economic and political inequalities of the Somocista system ‘as children born to untouchables in India acquire the skills and attitudes necessary for survival in the miserable roles they are destined to fill.’²⁹⁴

Instead, Helms relied upon accounts he received from former U.S. ambassador, Turner B. Shelton. The ambassador was a remarkably flawed

²⁹¹ Helms, “The Resignation Of President Somoza,” *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 18947.

²⁹² David D. Newsom, interview with Charles Stuart Kennedy, 15 March, 1995, *The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training*, Frontline Diplomacy, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C, www.adst.org (hereafter *ADST*).

²⁹³ Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards”.

²⁹⁴ Helms, “The Importance Of Nicaragua,” *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 15867-15868 and Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards”.

source for evaluating the democratic foundations of Nicaraguan politics. A political appointee by President Nixon on account of his fundraising efforts and close association with Nixon's friend Bebe Rebozo, Shelton horrified the State Department by refusing to allow the U.S. residence to be used as an operations base and emergency accommodation during the relief effort following the 1972 earthquake. His sycophantic devotion to Somoza led the embassy's political section chief to label Shelton 'a terrible ambassador', so enamoured with the Nicaraguan president that he 'literally worshipped' him.²⁹⁵ Helms may also have been influenced by an array of material in conservative publications of the time, lauding almost every aspect of Nicaraguan society.

Content with this rosy picture of Nicaragua's social, economic, and democratic structures, Helms maintained that while the continuation of a Somoza government was acceptable, a post-Somoza regime that maintained the current system was also satisfactory. 'I call upon President Somoza', Helms told the Senate in mid-June, 'to resist any untoward pressure, from the United States or from other nations, to step down unless it can be assured that a structure of free government, one that is demonstrably the will of the people, will follow and maintain full political, property, and human rights.' Indeed, in his opinion, Somoza had 'constantly shown himself open to peaceful change, provided that such change does not leave a political vacuum.'²⁹⁶

Coming on the day a bipartisan group of senators condemned Somoza's government for the murder of ABC journalist William Stewart, executed by the Nicaraguan National Guard while covering the revolution,

²⁹⁵ James R. Cheek, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 12 November, 2010, *ADST*, and Charles Anthony Gillespie, Jr., interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 29 November, 1995, *ADST*.

²⁹⁶ Helms, "The Importance of Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 15868.

the senator's comments were especially eye-catching.²⁹⁷ The faith Helms placed in his sources, and in right-wing governments across Latin America, suggests he was sincere in this line of argument. Yet there was no doubt that dressing his support for Somoza, or at least the structures of *Somocismo*, in a constitutionalist argument certainly helped at a time when support for Somoza was increasingly politically unpalatable.

If Helms disagreed with Kirkpatrick on democracy in Nicaragua, he was in complete agreement with her, and conservatives of many stripes, about the illegitimacy of revolution. There was 'absolutely no evidence that conditions in Nicaragua are so bad that they justify a violent revolution to effect reform', he argued. The war was 'not being supported indigenously' but was 'plainly receiving its strongest support from Cuba, Panama, and Costa Rica.'²⁹⁸ Kirkpatrick used "Dictatorships and Double Standards" to raise the same point. She noted Somoza was 'succumbing to arms and soldiers' rather than popular will and that the Sandinistas received 'a great many arms from other non-Nicaraguans'.²⁹⁹ Other conservatives pressed

²⁹⁷ Howard Baker described the incident as 'inexcusable' in his remarks, "A Tragic Death," *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 15846. George McGovern said it was a 'senseless murder', before launching a scathing attack on the Somoza government for having 'raped, pillaged, and corrupted the social and political fabric of Nicaragua' within 'the guise of democracy, freedom, and capitalism'. George McGovern (SD), "The Somoza Regime - Murder In Cold Blood", *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 15856. Further Senate criticism of the murder can be seen in Robert C. Byrd (WV), "A Tragic Death", *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 15845, Jennings Randolph (WV), "ABC Newsman Bill Stewart Slain In Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 15845, David Durenberger (MN), "The Murder Of Mr. Stewart", *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 15866-15867, and Dale Bumpers (AR), "Saving Nicaragua From Somoza", *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 15868-15869.

²⁹⁸ Helms, "The Importance of Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 15867-15868.

²⁹⁹ Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards."

home this argument, pointing out the apparent links between the Sandinistas and the international “communist-terrorist” front.³⁰⁰

Conservative criticism of the White House belied the fact that neither wanted a Sandinista victory. The State Department recognised early on in the Nicaraguan Revolution that the Sandinistas were supported by external, communist agencies, and Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Viron Vaky had warned the administration in late 1978 ‘we should avoid their gaining the upper hand.’³⁰¹ Throughout 1979, as Helms chastised Carter for his policies of ‘cold hostility’ toward Somoza that amounted to ‘indirect support of the guerrillas’, the administration manoeuvred to head off a post-Somoza Sandinista government.³⁰² Secretary of State Cyrus Vance urged the Organization of American States to authorise a multinational peace-keeping force ostensibly to retain law and order, but with the additional benefit of countering FSLN military gains. Zbigniew Brzezinski, meanwhile, called for unilateral American intervention in order to prevent a Sandinista victory.³⁰³

In the end, Carter and his advisers were unable to achieve the removal of Somoza while also heading off a Sandinista victory. In the aftermath of the revolution, the Sandinistas emerged as the dominant political force in Nicaragua. Initially, the new government in Managua tempered its public hostility toward the United States. The Sandinistas

³⁰⁰ “Castro’s Efforts to Destabilize Nicaragua,” *Human Events*, 16 September, 1978, 5, Belden Bell. See also, Arostegui, “Central America’s Guerrillas Aren’t Robin Hoods,” 10, and “PLO At Work Subverting Latin America,” *Human Events*, 25 November, 1978, 14.

³⁰¹ Memorandum of Conversation, U.S. Policy to Nicaragua, 4 September, 1978, folder “Serial Xs – [9/78 – 12/78],” Box 36, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, *JCL*.

³⁰² Letter, Senators Jesse Helms, Strom Thurmond, James McClure, Orrin Hatch, Gordon Humphrey, and Roger Jenson to President Carter, 21 June, 1979, folder – “Executive – 8/1/79 – 1/20/81”, Box 47, WHCF – C0114, *JCL*.

³⁰³ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 24-25.

proclaimed they would seek amicable relations with their northern neighbour, largely out of an urgent need for financial assistance to reconstruct Nicaragua's shattered economy. The Carter administration believed granting such aid would force the Sandinistas to maintain a moderate stance and deter any further gravitation toward Cuba and the Soviet Union. "The Sandinistas are wearing a moderate mask," one State Department official told William LeoGrande at the time. "Our job is to nail it on."³⁰⁴

To achieve this goal, the State Department drafted the Special Central American Assistance Act of 1979. It contained \$75 million for Nicaragua and received bipartisan support in the Senate. Ed Zorinsky, Democratic chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee's Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, championed the bill and criticised House conservatives who had attached strict conditions to the aid. 'Do we wish to suck our thumbs and sit it out, or do we wish to stay in the game and play to win?' he asked colleagues during debate on the matter.³⁰⁵ Moderate Republicans, such as Richard Lugar (R-IN) and David Durenberger (R-MN), agreed. 'I continue to believe that the situation in Nicaragua is not hopeless', Lugar said in support of the package. 'The country has not yet become a Marxist state.'³⁰⁶ Durenberger was more emphatic. 'If we do nothing... we guarantee increasing degrees of Soviet and Cuban influence and we face the certainty of failure.'³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 30.

³⁰⁵ Ed Zorinsky (NE), "Special Central American Assistance Act Of 1979," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 11646.

³⁰⁶ Richard Lugar (IN), "Special Central American Assistance Act Of 1979," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 11649.

³⁰⁷ David Durenberger (MN), "Special Central American Assistance Act Of 1979," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 11664.

Helms, however, disputed the suggestion that the United States could engage constructively with the Sandinistas. Their intractable Marxism and connections to international communism undermined any chance of reconciliation. 'I fear that we are paying \$75 million virtually to lock Nicaragua into the Socialist camp of Fidel Castro', he told colleagues on the Foreign Relations Committee, 'and we are being asked to bail out the Sandinistas and to ease their consolidation of power with Cuban support and all of the rest of it.'³⁰⁸ When the bill came before the full Senate, Helms was similarly emphatic. 'This Senator does not understand', he said, 'how it can be successfully contended that we are going somehow to stave off a Communist takeover – which already is a fait accompli – by subsidizing communism by sending the Sandinistas \$75 million.'³⁰⁹

Helms' reaction was in keeping with those earliest members of the anti-Sandinista network who pointed to the rapid "Cubanisation" of Nicaragua and the Sandinistas' apparent ideological rigidity as evidence of the country's inescapable communist future.³¹⁰ Helms, using his growing network of contacts in the region, inserted new details into this anti-Sandinista narrative. For example, citing information furnished by a 'distinguished', albeit anonymous, American that he had personally commissioned to report on Nicaragua, Helms claimed between 1,000 and 1,200 Cuban 'doctors' and 'probably as many as 2,000' Cuban teachers

³⁰⁸ U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nominations of H. Carl McCall [and Three Others; Sundry Other Business]*, 13 December, 1979, 54.

³⁰⁹ Jesse Helms (NC), "Special Central American Assistance Act Of 1979," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 11668.

³¹⁰ For examples, see "How Goes Nicaragua," *Human Events*, 1 December, 1979, 12, "Key Sandinista Leader Visits Fidel – Again," *Human Events*, 25 August, 1979, 4, "State Department Balks at Challenging Cuban Threat," *Human Events*, 11 August, 1979, 4, and "Cuban Trained Borge Amassing Total Power," *Human Events*, 11 August, 1979, 4. *National Review* contributors also added their weight to this narrative. See Robert S. Strother, "The New Boys in the Bunker," *National Review*, 23 November, 1979, 1494-1496, and M. Stanton Evans, "At Home," *National Review*, 7 September, 1979, B134.

were already in Nicaragua. Indicating that several of these Cubans had already been killed in violent clashes with peasants, Helms added that Castro's government was siphoning off U.S. relief supplies by flying the materiel out of Managua on a daily basis.³¹¹

Despite denials from senior administration officials – testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary of State Warren Christopher, U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua Lawrence Pezzullo, and deputy assistant secretary of state John Bushnell all denied Helms' Cuban charges – the senator mounted a persistent campaign to stop the funding for Nicaragua.³¹² He was the solitary dissenting vote when the Foreign Relations Committee voted to send the legislation to the Senate floor, and was one of thirty-five senators to vote against final passage of the bill. In between, Helms tried a series of legislative manoeuvres to undermine administration policy. He first attempted to amend the legislation to reduce the funding to \$35 million, before subsequently demanding that the entire bill be re-submitted to the Foreign Relations Committee on account of changes made by the House.³¹³ Rebuffed, the senator then demanded that the assistance be made conditional on the Sandinistas accepting a constitution that mirrored the United States' Bill of Rights. 'For the life of me', he argued, 'I cannot see ... what infirmity it does to this piece of legislation to spell out what we expect of the people in other countries, the regimes in other countries, which are asking for enormous sums of the taxpayers' money.'³¹⁴

³¹¹ Helms refused to identify his source, though he indicated he would be willing to divulge the individual's name to Frank Church, chair of the committee. U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *S. 2010*, 7 December, 1979, 91.

³¹² Committee on Foreign Relations, *S. 2010*, 7 December, 1979, 95-95, and Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nominations of H. Carl McCall [and Three Others; Sundry Other Business]*, 13 December, 1979, 51-52.

³¹³ Helms, "Special Central American And Caribbean Security Assistance Act Of 1979," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 1083-1087, and *Ibid.*, 11655.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11669.

It was an opinion that the senator consistently maintained in his approach to foreign aid, echoing Carter's use of economic leverage to influence human rights policies in other Latin American countries, but it would take an ironic twist in the next decade as he repeatedly emphasised conditions to be imposed upon the Sandinistas in return for *not* providing aid to the Contras. At this stage, with aid to the new government in Managua enjoying bipartisan support in Washington, Helms' proposal met with hostility. Lugar ascribed its introduction to 'a certain degree of mischief' on the part of Helms, and suggested it was an obvious killer amendment.³¹⁵ Ed Zorinsky was more scathing. 'In my estimation,' he said, 'this amendment pretends to test the Americanism of myself and my 99 colleagues. How dare we vote against the Bill of Rights?'³¹⁶

Helms' amendment *was* a test. Both the American Conservative Union and the American Security Council cited the tabling motion against Helms' proposal as a benchmark vote in their annual ratings indices, while the Senate roll call vote on passing the aid bill was published in *Human Events*.³¹⁷ It not only demonstrated the growing importance of the anti-Sandinista cause in modern conservative thought, but also the anti-Sandinista network's interest in using legislation as a means of defining allies and opponents.

³¹⁵ Lugar, "Special Central American Assistance Act Of 1979," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 11666.

³¹⁶ Zorinsky, "Special Central American Assistance Act Of 1979," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 11669.

³¹⁷ "1980 ACU Senate Vote Descriptions," *ACU Ratings of Congress*, accessed 30 July, 2013, http://www.conservative.org/ratingsarchive/uscongress/1980/desc_sen.html, "Rollcalls: Nicaragua Aid," *Human Events*, 31 May, 1980, 4, and "American Security Council Rates Congress," *Human Events*, 4 October, 1980, 12.

Helms consistently used the aid package as a means of staking out policy positions. Speaking on his effort to reduce funding to Nicaragua, the senator stated that, 'If I do nothing else with this amendment, Mr. President, tabled though it may be, I will at least have put this Senator on record about the condition as it exists in Nicaragua today.'³¹⁸ His motion to resubmit the bill to the Foreign Relations Committee came out of his desire 'to have a test vote on this thing', while a final vote on the bill 'suits me, just so I have a chance to vote no.'³¹⁹

After the Sandinistas reneged on several promises concerning democratic plurality and freedom of speech made in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Helms consistently used the aid vote to criticise colleagues who had maintained the Nicaraguan government could be trusted. For Helms, roll call votes were a matter of historical record, which, for the senator at least, helpfully obscured the nuances of his colleagues' decision-making. Thus, for example, Helms had a record of Daniel Patrick Moynihan voting in favour of the aid, despite the New York Democrat tempering his support with concern about potential abuse of the legislation.³²⁰

Nevertheless, the consensus was in favour of sending aid to Nicaragua. Moderate Republicans, as noted, were sympathetic to the request, and conservatives were divided. Unlike Helms, some on the right supported the Carter administration's argument that assistance could be an instrument to dissuade the Sandinistas from moving closer to the Soviet-Cuban sphere of influence. Howard E. Vander Clute, commander-in-chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, told Congress to give the Sandinistas 'a real

³¹⁸ Helms, "Special Central American Assistance Act Of 1979," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 1086.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11655-11656

³²⁰ Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY), "Special Central American Assistance Act Of 1979," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 11673.

policy choice', while *National Review* argued that, while a remote possibility, aid 'might buy the revolution off.'³²¹ Roger Fontaine, Ronald Reagan's Latin America specialist and later head of the National Security Council's Latin America section between 1981 and 1983, best summarised this strand of conservative thinking when he testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. 'I am fully aware of the distaste for helping a Marxist or semi-Marxist regime', he said, but

... without any aid or very small aid programs, I think what would happen would be inevitable, that we would have, as I said before, a fullblown Marxist regime very quickly. With the aid we still may end up with the same result. But I am willing to gamble on \$75 million, or even a couple of hundred million dollars, on the chance, a reasonably good chance, that that could be prevented.³²²

Fontaine's support for the administration and constructive engagement with the Sandinistas would not last. Within a year, he and several other staunchly anti-communist members of the Council for Inter-American Security authored "A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties", a conservative blueprint for Latin America policy which condemned Carter's approach and advocated a renewed anti-communist crusade in the Americas. Helms' anti-Sandinista activities in the final months of the Carter administration became a part of a much wider effort by conservative intellectuals, policy advocacy groups, and media publications.³²³ There was no denying that many of these hard-liners had

³²¹ U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nomination of Robert E. White, of Massachusetts, To Be Ambassador to El Salvador. Other Committee Business*, 21 February, 1980, 40, and *National Review*, "Nicaraguan Dominoes," 7 March, 1980, 268.

³²² Committee on Foreign Relations, *S. 2010*, 6 December, 1979, 16-34.

³²³ Kirkpatrick's essay caught the attention of Ronald Reagan, who brought her into his presidential campaign team, and subsequently his

arrived later than Helms at the conclusion the Sandinistas were among the most dangerous national security threats facing the United States at this time.

Though this network applauded Helms for fighting the Nicaragua aid programme, the senator's efforts lacked traction because of resistance among the Republican establishment.³²⁴ The party's policy experts were so wary of Nicaragua as a topic that they urged attendees at the GOP's July 1980 convention to avoid making it an issue.³²⁵ Helms ignored this advice, and made a substantial change to its policy stance on Nicaragua during the convention. After the full platform was voted on, the Republican candidate for the presidency faced running on a platform of regime change in Nicaragua. The GOP, the foreign policy plank stated:

deplore the Marxist Sandinista take-over of Nicaragua and the Marxist attempts to destabilize El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. We do not support United States assistance to any Marxist government in this hemisphere and we oppose the Carter Administration aid program for the government of Nicaragua. However, we will support the efforts of the Nicaraguan people to establish a free and independent government.³²⁶

administration. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 54 – 56. The authors of the Santa Fe Document would occupy positions in the Reagan White House too. Leslie W. Hepple, "Lewis Tambs, Latin American Geopolitics and the American New Right," *Les Hepples Unpublished Papers*, University of Bristol School of Geopolitical Sciences, accessed 20 October 2012, <http://www.ggy.bris.ac.uk/personal/LesHepple/lewis.pdf>, 14.

³²⁴ "Senate Revives Sandinista Aid Program," *Human Events*, 31 May, 1980, 3.

³²⁵ Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 21.

³²⁶ Republican Party Platforms, "Republican Party Platform of 1980, 15 July 1980," online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed 1 August, 2011,

It was no coincidence that the language was strikingly similar to Helms' previous protests against the Sandinistas.³²⁷ He had personally drawn up the first two sentences. The final sentence, however, was absent from Helms' original proposal and had been vetted neither in the official read-through process nor by the full platform committee. It originated with one of Helms' senior foreign policy staffers, John Carbaugh, who succeeded in bypassing the convention protocols to win its inclusion.

That Carbaugh introduced the language is significant. Advocacy of anti-communist counter-revolution was a fundamental element of what later became known as the Reagan Doctrine, but neither Reagan nor his senior advisers took part in the formulation of this platform plank. Instead, a member of Helms' anti-Sandinista network moulded this early articulation of the Reagan Doctrine. Furthermore, the link between Carbaugh's language – which he later acknowledged to be a clear statement of intent to remove the Sandinistas from power – and subsequent Contra activities suggests that Helms' aide, and the anti-Sandinista network in general, sought an active implementation of their doctrine.³²⁸

Carbaugh, who had a reputation for staunch conservatism, political activism, and effective networking, used the convention as an opportunity to increase the size and scope of the anti-Sandinista network.³²⁹ He

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25844#axzz1Tylk9sty>.

³²⁷ For examples of the senator's reaction to the Sandinistas, see Helms, "The Importance of Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 15867-15869, Jesse Helms (NC), "The Resignation of President Somoza," *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1979), 18947-18948, and Helms, "Special Central American and Caribbean Security Assistance Act of 1979," *Cong. Rec.* 125 (1980), 1083-1090.

³²⁸ Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 19-21.

³²⁹ Carbaugh's gained particular notoriety for his efforts to publicise the presence of the Soviet combat brigade in Cuba in 1979, and for his attendance at the Rhodesia talks in London in the same year which led to

accompanied Nat Hamrick, a North Carolinian businessman with strong ties to the Somoza dynasty, and Gerardo Schamis, an Argentinean diplomat attending on behalf of General Roberto Viola, around the convention.³³⁰ The Argentinean connection indicated the growing transnational character of the network, as U.S. anti-communists dissatisfied with Carter's apparent ineffectiveness in combating leftist expansion in the hemisphere sought out regional allies with similar sentiments. It also highlighted Carbaugh's desire to ally with groups with anti-communist paramilitary experience.³³¹

At this time, in Nicaragua, anti-communist paramilitary groups were beginning to coalesce in an effort to fight back against the Sandinistas. Many bands of anti-Sandinista rebels emerged out of private conflicts and rivalry in isolated rural areas, but the movement also included indigenous Miskito fighters opposed to the Sandinistas' plans for their communities and former anti-Somoza activists who had disavowed the Sandinista government as it began to govern. There was also a large collection of former National Guardsmen, who had fled in the waning days of the Somoza regime. Robert Kagan, sympathetic to the Reagan administration, argues the largest group among this anti-Sandinista Contra movement was the Miskito population: thus presenting the force as a bottom-up insurrection from within Nicaraguan society.³³² Yet an American framework for the growing insurrection was now inserted, as Carbaugh and Hamrick introduced Schamis to several Reagan advisers, including

accusations of his improper interference in the negotiation process. Though there were arguments over the validity of the charges, his skill in networking was indisputable: he secured a personal meeting with Margaret Thatcher. Kathy Sawyer, "Two Helms Point Men: Locking Horns With The Liberals," *Washington Post*, 27 November, 1979, A2.

³³⁰ General Viola would become Argentina's president in March 1981. Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 22.

³³¹ For details on the Argentine strategy to fight communism in Central America, see Ariel C. Armony, *Argentina, The United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977 - 1984* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997).

³³² Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 222-223.

Reagan's chief-of-staff when California governor and future Attorney General, Ed Meese.³³³ This growing American role, alongside the robust anti-communist rhetoric from Reagan's campaign, led right-wing Latin American governments to believe with increasing confidence that a Reagan election victory would yield much greater support for regional anti-communist operations.³³⁴

Thus, even prior to Reagan's presidential election victory and his subsequent efforts on behalf of the Contras, an emerging anti-Sandinista alliance had set in motion efforts to create an aggressive policy of assistance for anti-communist, counter-revolutionary groups in Nicaragua. Given their role in these activities, and the striking similarities between their initial endeavours and the subsequent reality of the Contra programme, Helms and Carbaugh can be regarded as having an important influence on early manifestations of a doctrine that would be intimately linked with Reagan over the next eight years.

The Helms-Reagan Doctrine, 1980-1984

Reagan's election to the presidency in 1980 gave Helms a greater voice in Nicaragua policy. The election of a Republican majority in the Senate on the coattails of Reagan's landslide victory, and the growth in stature of conservatism within the national party, elevated Helms' position in the GOP. As a consequence of the new Republican majority, he was promoted to chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations' Western Hemisphere Subcommittee. This allowed him to oversee Nicaragua policy, convening hearings on issues that mattered most to him, utilising key witnesses to advocate his policies, and framing the situation from a more prominent pulpit. Helms would not only enjoy a front-row

³³³ Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 22.

³³⁴ Armony, *Argentina*, 64, and Michael Barnes, interview with author, 6 August, 2013.

view of the development of the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua, he would have more opportunities to shape it.

The first of these opportunities occurred during the transition and immediate post-inaugural period, when Helms and the anti-Sandinista network worked to remould the foreign policy bureaucracy in favour of a more hospitable environment for hard-line policy in Nicaragua (and Central America more generally). Led by John Carbaugh and made up of several anti-Sandinista activists, including Roger Fontaine, a transition team was sent into the State Department's Bureau of Inter-American Affairs (ARA) during the changeover period. Their goal, according to Carbaugh, was to "take an inventory of the major outstanding issues and the people and approaches being used to deal with them so this information will be available to the decision makers on Reagan's staff."³³⁵

Carbaugh was keen at the time to stress the conciliatory tone and substance of the team's work. Arguing that there was only disagreement over three to five per cent of Carter's foreign policies, he told John Goshko of the *Washington Post* that "We have to be careful to look at the human factor and see where these people are coming from. They're people who, in effect, gave birth to a baby and who have raised it lovingly for four years. Now we can't just throw their baby out with the bathwater." There had to be "some continuity", he added, and "where change is unavoidable, it should be gradual wherever possible." Nevertheless, when the governing party changed, "there has to be a change of people and policies. In the end, the State Department must be stamped with Reagan's imprimatur. That's the bottom line."³³⁶

³³⁵ John M. Goshko, "Transitions Carbaugh Alarms State Dept.," *Washington Post*, 23 November, 1980, A12.

³³⁶ Goshko, "Transition's Carbaugh Alarms State Dept.," A12.

State Department personnel, however, recalled a rather different atmosphere. Robert B. Morley, part of ARA's Office of Policy Planning and Coordination, later described his experiences with the transition team:

They not only talked to me about policy issues, they questioned me closely about the roles and behavior of front office personnel, the Deputy Assistant Secretaries and Assistant Secretary. Morale deteriorated. People concluded that those who had carried out the policies of the Carter Administration would have their careers destroyed. They were right.³³⁷

David Newsom, a senior State Department official, agreed. Those linked to Carter's policies were 'severely penalized' for their work. Individuals 'at lower levels,' he said, 'people like Jim Cheek, who worked on Latin American affairs, people who had gotten on the wrong side of Jesse Helms, never recovered during the Reagan years.'³³⁸

Pressure from this team, and conservatives more generally, led to the removal of Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs William Bowdler and deputy assistant secretary James Cheek. Only days after the inauguration, Robert White, ambassador to El Salvador, was removed from his post, followed shortly afterwards by Lawrence Pezzullo in Nicaragua. Yet personnel change was not the only item on the transition team's agenda. A report prepared for the White House after Carbaugh's interviews with ARA staff advocated a renewed emphasis on the role of Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs for controlling regional policy. Carbaugh and the team concluded that the National Security Council, especially Robert Pastor, had exerted an unnecessary and unacceptable

³³⁷ Robert B. Morley, interview with Charles Stuart Kennedy, 23 July, 1997, *ADST*.

³³⁸ David D. Newsom, interview with Charles Stuart Kennedy, 17 June, 1991, *ADST*.

degree of influence on Latin America policy during the Carter administration. Given the suggestion at the time that Carbaugh, supported by Helms, was looking to head ARA under the Reagan administration, this may well have reflected an attempt to concentrate policy influence in their own hands.³³⁹ Of course, in time, there would be a certain irony in these complaints. It was the excessive latitude afforded to members of Reagan's National Security Council that produced the Iran-Contra scandals and consequent collapse of the Contra programme.

So pervasive was Carbaugh's influence during the transition that one State Department official, when asked about the Reagan administration's policies for Latin America shortly after the president's inauguration, replied, "Why don't you ask John Carbaugh – he seems to be running things around here."³⁴⁰ Carbaugh's actions indicated a hubris that Richard Neustadt has identified as a common characteristic of several presidential transitions in the post-war era. Incoming staff can suffer from a sense of invulnerability intoxicated by their campaign victory: "they" couldn't, wouldn't, didn't, but "we" will', as Neustadt pithily summarises.³⁴¹ In conjunction with campaign momentum and partisan division that Martha Joynt Kumar sees as important contributing factors in transition hostility – and in this case magnified by the notable ideological split between the Carter and Reagan teams – it is not surprising that Carbaugh and those

³³⁹ John Bushnell, interview with Charles Stuart Kennedy, 21 July, 1998, *ADST*, John Maclean, "Banker is likely choice for Haig's assistant," *Chicago Tribune*, 10 February, 1981, B6, and Goshko, "Transition's Carbaugh Alarms State Dept.," A12.

³⁴⁰ Barry Rubin, *Secrets of State: The State Department and the Struggle Over U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 220.

³⁴¹ Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 248.

around him displayed an aggressive and sweeping approach to institutional reform within ARA.³⁴²

Building an institutional environment conducive to a hard-line Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua was not only dependent on removing individuals perceived to be obstacles. It required the introduction of new people deemed sufficiently conservative to carry out the anti-Sandinista strategy envisioned by Helms and the network. As *Human Events* argued, 'there is no way he [Reagan] can clean out 40 years of accumulation in the Augean stables without a massive effort to saturate the bureaucracy with people of his own philosophical bent.'³⁴³

Unlike the removal of personnel from ARA, in which Helms and his network appeared to have significant influence, introducing individuals into senior foreign policy positions offered more significant obstacles. For a start, choosing Cabinet level nominations was well beyond the remit of the senator. It was Reagan's 'kitchen cabinet' of wealthy businessmen and California advisers who advised the new president on Cabinet level appointees, while a separate group of aides, alongside Vice President-elect George H. W. Bush, Ed Meese, James Baker, Mike Deaver, William Casey, and E. Pendleton James worked on the final decision for each post. Only Senator Paul Laxalt, Reagan's closest friend in the Senate, provided any congressional input.³⁴⁴

³⁴² Martha Joynt Kumar, "Opportunities and Hazards: The White House Interview Program," (White House 2001 Project, 1998), 9-10, quoted in Kurt M. Campbell and James B. Steinberg, *Difficult Transitions: Foreign Policy Troubles at the Outset of Presidential Power* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 162.

³⁴³ "Despite Some Aberrations: Reagan Presidency Asserting Rightward Course," *Human Events*, 14 February, 1981, 1.

³⁴⁴ Carl M. Brauer, *Presidential Transitions: Eisenhower Through Reagan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 228.

Moreover, in contrast to the removal of State Department personnel, which was largely a matter of executive preference (though constrained by the foreign service code), placing individuals into senior positions required a careful traverse of the Senate confirmation process. This, as Gary Andres notes, is a particularly complex journey, given the overlapping spheres of policy, politics, and procedure inherent in the process.³⁴⁵ In the post-war period, the chamber had shown an increasing willingness to assert itself over Cabinet and sub-Cabinet nominations, and the delay, or even outright rejection, of executive appointments was a more common occurrence as a result.³⁴⁶ When seeking to disrupt policy or register disapproval of executive strategy, Helms was happy to embrace this assertiveness. However, in seeking to construct a movement conservative foreign policy bureaucracy, the senator and his allies found it a formidable obstacle to their efforts.

Nowhere was this more apparent than with the failed nomination of Ernest Lefever to replace Patricia Derian as head of human rights at the State Department. Lefever, a prominent neoconservative and member of the anti-détente group, the Committee on the Present Danger, who stressed the relationship between Judeo-Christian morality and foreign policy, had been picked as a sop to conservatives who feared Alexander Haig had failed to promote conservatives to senior State Department positions. Helms was seen by State Department officials as Lefever's biggest supporter on the

³⁴⁵ Gary J. Andres, "'The Contemporary Presidency': Parties, Process, and Presidential Power: Learning from Confirmation Politics in the U.S. Senate," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32, No. 1 (March, 2002), 147.

³⁴⁶ Norman Ornstein and Thomas Donilon point out that during when John F. Kennedy was elected, 196 top-level foreign policy posts were filled within two and a half months of his inauguration. Thirty-two years later, Bill Clinton's 786 nominees took, on average, almost nine months to take up their positions. Norman Ornstein and Thomas Donilon, "The Confirmation Clog," *Foreign Affairs* 79, No. 6 (November-December, 2000), 88.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee.³⁴⁷ Meanwhile, *Human Events* lauded the nominee because he 'is not going to use his post to bring down the regimes of stable, pro-American governments whose human rights policies are less harsh than the totalitarian forces battling to replace those governments.'³⁴⁸ *National Review* argued that if Lefever failed to be confirmed, 'the liberal-radical Hive will have recouped some of its losses.'³⁴⁹

Yet a furore over Lefever's links to Nestlé, then under examination for its marketing of infant formula in the Third World, as well as intense scepticism over his commitment to human rights, led the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to reject his nomination.³⁵⁰ Helms was one of only four members to support Lefever, numbers that were insufficient to overcome a dramatic display of institutional opposition to the conservative favourite. The administration's reluctance to fight on Lefever's behalf exacerbated existing conservative concern at the manner in which the Reagan administration had begun its first term. Picking up on dismay exhibited by New Right leaders like Richard Viguerie and Howard Philips, *National Review* reported that patience with Reagan 'is already exhausted.'³⁵¹

The majority of Reagan's diplomatic picks were successfully confirmed, however. Jeane Kirkpatrick, for example, was accepted as the

³⁴⁷ Scott Cohen, interview with Charles Stuart Kennedy, 21 June, 1990, *ADST*.

³⁴⁸ "Battle Heats Up Over Lefever Nomination," *Human Events*, 18 April, 1981, 3.

³⁴⁹ "The Lefever Sting," *National Review*, 3 April, 1981, 333.

³⁵⁰ Jerry Wayne Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis: The Committee on the Present Danger and the Politics of Containment* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1983), 295, and Judith Miller, "Rebuffed In Senate, Lefever Pulls Out As Rights Nominee," *The New York Times*, 6 June, 1981, 1.

³⁵¹ "For the Record," *National Review*, 20 February, 1981, 20.

new ambassador to the United Nations by 81 votes to zero, while Alexander Haig, President Nixon's post-Watergate chief-of-staff and Reagan's nominee for Secretary of State, passed the Senate 93-6. Helms and the anti-Sandinista community largely greeted these appointments with praise. The senator described Kirkpatrick as 'an extraordinary person' and a perfect fit for the era of national renewal promised by the new president, while *Human Events* called the appointment a 'shrewd' move to woo hawkish Democrats.³⁵² Helms was also supportive of Haig, 'vigorously' supporting the former NATO commander's nomination, and sharing the sentiment of Neal Freeman in *National Review* that Reagan was lucky to have a man of Haig's qualities.³⁵³ The general, Helms said, would be 'his own man as Secretary of State', and would 'not permit the Department to be taken over by any second-level advisers, or anyone on the outside.'³⁵⁴ Indeed, it was partly because Helms believed Haig would appoint conservatives to second-tier State posts that *Human Events* offered its own support for the new Secretary of State.³⁵⁵

Haig had been a close associate of Henry Kissinger and served as Richard Nixon's post-Watergate chief-of-staff, and perhaps it was surprising that Helms supported an individual closely associated with the architects of détente. After all, the senator blocked, or flat-out rejected,

³⁵² Jesse Helms (NC), "United Nations," *Cong. Rec.* 127 (1981), 1239, and "Reagan Signals Shift in U.S.-Third World Policy," *Human Events*, 3 January, 1981, 3.

³⁵³ Jesse Helms (NC), "Department Of State," *Cong. Rec.* 127 (1981), 616-617, and Neal Freeman, "Transition Fever," *National Review*, 12 December, 1980, 1498.

³⁵⁴ Helms, "Department Of State," *Cong. Rec.* 127 (1981), 616-617.

³⁵⁵ "Haig's Performance Pleases Hawks," *Human Events*, 34 January, 1981, 1, and "How Hawkish is Haig?" *Human Events*, 27 December, 1980, 8. Other conservatives were less sure on the appointment. M. Stanton Evans, for example, noted Haig's association with Kissinger, and pointed out how little was known about the new secretary's foreign policy views. M. Stanton Evans, "Some Questions for Alexander Haig," *Human Events*, 17 January, 1981, 5.

several prominent nominees who he saw as too closely associated with Haig or détente-era Cold War policies. Helms subjected Richard Burt, Chester Crocker, and, critically, the incoming Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Tom Enders, all of whom were seen as Haig allies, to lengthy delays in their confirmation process.³⁵⁶ Indeed, the senator was one of only two individuals to vote against Caspar Weinberger's confirmation as Secretary of Defense. (The other was his North Carolina and conservative colleague, John East.) Weinberger, Helms argued, was too fiscally restrictive and enamoured with détente's strategic arms limitation discussions to fully embrace the military spending required to re-assert American power.³⁵⁷

Later assessments of Haig's role in the Reagan administration have pointed out the flaws in the appointment. The general, it is widely argued, was too incendiary in his policy pronouncements, overly abrasive in his management style, and closely associated with Kissinger to work effectively with the White House.³⁵⁸ To Helms, however, Haig was the kind of no-nonsense anti-communist who would rescue U.S. foreign policy from the 'bipartisan folly' of the past two decades. He certainly did not rubber-stamp Haig's appointment out of loyalty to Reagan, as his treatment of Weinberger demonstrated. Rather, ignoring Haig's prior association with détente, Helms 'vigorously' supported Haig's nomination in the belief that the new Secretary of State would reassert the United States' position as 'a beacon of hope for the millions of people around the world who are today oppressed by communism.'³⁵⁹

³⁵⁶ Burt was nominated as director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, Crocker as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. Rubin, *Secrets of State*, 207-208.

³⁵⁷ Jesse Helms (NC), "Department of Defense," *Cong. Rec.* 127 (1981), 554-557.

³⁵⁸ Rubin, *Secrets of State*, 204.

³⁵⁹ Helms, "Department Of State," *Cong. Rec.* 127 (1981), 617.

Organisational change is common in all societies, as Frederick Mosher points out in his review of presidential transitions and the foreign policy process. Yet such change, he continued, tends to be 'less pervasive, less intensive... and less frantic' than those of American presidential transitions.³⁶⁰ Several scholars have pointed to the pitfalls of frantic presidential transitions, including Kumar, who argued that hostile transitions could lead to a loss of institutional memory and training. She suggests policy and organisational effectiveness can be achieved by maintaining individuals from the previous administration, thus ensuring a greater degree of continuity.³⁶¹

Helms' goal, however, was not to produce a smooth transition and certainly not any continuity with the Carter administration. He did not seek the bipartisanship that Roger Porter sees as vital during transitions.³⁶² He sought a clean break, however disruptive, from the foreign policies of the past. He engineered personnel change that undermined potential policy and knowledge continuation by removing those associated with Carter's Central American framework. Instead, he backed ideological partisans whose appeal lay precisely in their lack of knowledge and sympathy to previous policies.

Following on from their success at the convention, buoyed by the election of a conservative to the White House, and now boosted by a more

³⁶⁰ Frederick C. Mosher, "Presidential Transitions and Foreign Policy: The American Experience," *Public Administration Review* 45, No. 4 (July-August, 1985), 468.

³⁶¹ Martha Joynt Kumar, "Opportunities and Hazards: The White House Interview Program," (White House 2001 Project, 1998), 9-10, quoted in Campbell and Steinberg, *Difficult Transitions*, 162.

³⁶² Roger Porter, "Of Hazards and Opportunities: Transitions and the Modern Presidency," Presidential Power Revisited Conference, Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, 1996, quoted in Campbell and Steinberg, *Difficult Transitions*, 153.

sympathetic senior foreign policy staff, the anti-Sandinista network began to push harder on behalf of the emerging Contra movement. Their first major success was the suspension of aid to Nicaragua, which Reagan agreed to on 1 April 1981, following an intensive lobbying campaign by conservatives both within and outside the administration.³⁶³ Helms contributed by calling the arrest of the Nicaraguan Human Rights Commission's president in February, along with the administration's white paper on El Salvador, grounds for an immediate suspension of aid: 'the presumption should be that this is not an isolated phenomenon, but is rather an example of systematic violation of those rights [human rights and free press].'³⁶⁴

Alongside these more public initiatives, Helms' contacts worked behind the scenes to influence the composition of the Contra leadership. Multiple rebel factions had emerged in the aftermath of the Revolution, ranging from disaffected ex-Sandinistas to groups of former National Guardsmen, but Carbaugh and Hamrick agreed with Schamis that Colonel Enrique Bermudez Varela was the best candidate for the role of overall commander.³⁶⁵ Bermudez's previous position in Washington D.C. as Somoza's military attaché, as well as his reputation for integrity and hard work, insulated him from accusations of complicity in Somoza's excesses. His post-Somoza role as leader of the anti-Sandinista 15th September Legion, meanwhile, buttressed his military credibility in the eyes of those seeking a paramilitary solution to the Sandinista problem.

Their success in promoting Bermudez was a testament to the advantages of the informal networking that Helms and his allies practiced.

³⁶³ Edward Walsh, "U.S. Economic Aid to Nicaragua Is Suspended but May Be Resumed," *Washington Post*, 2 April, 1981, A2.

³⁶⁴ Jesse Helms (NC), "The Arrest And Trial Of The President Of The Nicaragua Human Rights Commission," *Cong. Rec.* 127 (1981), 2802.

³⁶⁵ Pardo-Maurer, *The Contras*, 2, and Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 50.

They used their growing network of contacts to press hard in the transition period for General Viola to visit the U.S., and were rewarded when the Argentinean journeyed to Washington in March 1981. Viola's visit, according to Hamrick, confirmed the burgeoning alliance between Argentina and the U.S. on behalf of the Contras. The following month, Carbaugh and Hamrick accompanied prominent Nicaraguan exile Francisco Aguirre to Buenos Aires. There they met with Colonel Mario Davico, who commanded Argentinean operations in Central America.³⁶⁶ Between them they arranged the specifics of cooperation between the U.S. and Argentina in the Contra programme, and in the following days Bermudez himself visited Argentina and secured its leaders' blessings.³⁶⁷

The network's size and influence were revealed in December 1982 when Hector Frances, who claimed to be a defector from Argentina's Intelligence Battalion 601, named Hamrick as one of a number of individuals involved in operations to overthrow the Sandinistas. Frances testified that Hamrick had been working with right-wing Argentines, Hondurans, and Costa Ricans to support the Contras. Frances' statements also suggested that Helms was being used to build influence and contacts in Washington for those who supported the rebels. Hamrick was said to be "opening doors" in the U.S. capital, and though it was unclear as to whether Helms was aware of this, Hamrick's personal association with the senator was regarded as an important element of his influence.³⁶⁸

Frances' claims suggest that not only were Helms' staffers actively involved in the development of the Contras prior to Reagan's November 1981 authorisation of formal, and legal, U.S. support for the movement, but that the network's influence was expanding along with its membership.

³⁶⁶ Christopher Dickey, "Argentine Defector Tells Of Multinational Plots For Sandinistas' Ouster," *Washington Post*, 2 December, 1982, A22.

³⁶⁷ Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 50-53 and Armony, *Argentina*, 64.

³⁶⁸ Dickey, "Argentine Defector," A22.

These results were not inconsequential, as Bermudez's promotion demonstrated. Furthermore, those involved in the network testified as to the importance of Helms' men. In addition to Frances' assertions about Hamrick, Schamis noted Carbaugh's "serious" commitment to the cause.³⁶⁹ The reports suggest that a senior aide to a United States senator worked alongside private American citizens in covert actions against a foreign government, thus violating the 1799 Logan Act that prohibited private U.S. citizens from engaging in acts or communications with representatives of a foreign government for the purpose of influencing the United States' foreign policy.³⁷⁰

With his staff assisting in the creation of a more coherent paramilitary strategy during the summer of 1981, it appeared surprising that the senator offered private encouragement for Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (ARA) Tom Enders' attempts to broker a diplomatic rapprochement between the United States and the Sandinistas during this period. Approached by Enders about a six-month diplomatic campaign aimed at reducing tensions between the two nations, the senator replied that the assistant secretary could have one year. "If you can get them to negotiate in good faith," Helms told Enders, "you can give it a try."³⁷¹

³⁶⁹ Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 51.

³⁷⁰ Carbaugh was well aware of the Logan Act, having written his master's thesis on the legislation. Sawyer, "Two Helms Point Men," A2. Ironically, Senator Barry Goldwater would accuse liberal senators of conducting unauthorised foreign policy during the acrimonious debate over Contra aid in April 1985, while the president's National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane later referred to 'private diplomacy' by members of Congress as damaging to Reagan's Central America policy. Barry Goldwater (AZ), "Funds for Supporting Military or Paramilitary Operations in Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 131 (1985), 8837, and Letter, Robert C. McFarlane to Representative Newt Gingrich, 3 May, 1984, ID229013, C0114 BOX 136 WHORM: Subject File, *Ronald Reagan Library* (hereafter *RRL*).

³⁷¹ Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 66.

The irony for Helms was that the April cut off in aid he had sought prompted Enders' decision to seek a last-ditch compromise aimed at averting a covert paramilitary strategy in Nicaragua. The senator's support for negotiations was not entirely incompatible with the anti-Sandinista network's increasingly belligerent approach. Enders' plan was backed by some pro-Contra elements as a means of insulating the White House from criticism that it had not sought a peaceful solution with the Sandinistas.³⁷² By offering his own support for a negotiated settlement, Helms insured himself against similar criticism. He also helped the long-term viability of the Contra programme. The senator and others in the anti-Sandinista network could claim in later years that diplomacy had been tried, but that the Contras were the only instrument remaining.

Helms' prominent position in the anti-Sandinista alliance was evident from Enders' contact. As the assistant secretary told Roy Gutman in a 1985 interview, "I didn't want to be accused of hiding something from him [Helms]."³⁷³ Whether Enders was alluding to possible consequences for his career or for the initiative is not clear. Given the senator's propensity to side-line officials who operated beyond his tolerance – a phenomenon referred to in the Department of State during subsequent years as a 'Dick Viets' problem, on account of Helms' stubborn resistance to Viets' posting as ambassador to Portugal, and one ably demonstrated in his approach to Robert White during this period – Enders might have been conscious of the personal ramifications of keeping Helms in the dark.³⁷⁴

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Richard N. Viets, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 6 April, 1990, *ADST*. It is worth noting that Helms' opposition in the Viets case was not on account of policy or ideological disagreements, but rather on the basis of the senator's concerns over possible financial impropriety by the ambassador. Jack Anderson and Joseph Spear, "Helms' Eye on Foreign Service Liberals," *Washington Post*, 18 August, 1987, E13.

In addition, given that Enders' initiative did not have the wholehearted backing of prominent anti-Sandinistas in the administration, such as CIA Director William Casey, U.N. ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, and then Deputy Secretary of State William Clark, further irritating hard-liners by concealing the plan from Helms appears to have been seen by Enders as a significant risk.³⁷⁵

Support for the Enders plan did not mean, however, that Helms backed a moderate Nicaragua policy. Indeed, even as Enders negotiated with the Sandinistas, Helms worked to undercut Senator Ed Zorinsky's legislation to ensure aid to Nicaragua's private sector was not used for any other purpose beyond supporting this sector of the country's economy. Though Zorinsky's legislation had the support of the White House, Helms disagreed with the Agency for International Development's (AID) assessment that companies in Nicaragua could be considered private despite the possibility that the Sandinistas could claim a 49 per cent stake in their ownership. Helms also told President Reagan that the Sandinistas would never permit American aid to get to the private sector to begin with.³⁷⁶ Meanwhile, he believed AID had failed to adequately account for missing funds from the previous year's budget.³⁷⁷

Despite White House support for the Zorinsky amendment, Helms portrayed his action as a Reaganite position. He questioned why the administration was sending taxpayers' money to the Sandinistas, and argued, without supporting evidence, that the real purpose of the funding was to buttress policy in case 'developments in Nicaragua might find the Sandinistas out of power, or renouncing its aggressive pro-Marxist

³⁷⁵ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 118.

³⁷⁶ Letter, Senator Jesse Helms to President Reagan, 22 October, 1981, ID045334, CO114, WHORM: Subject File, *RRL*.

³⁷⁷ Jesse Helms (NC), "International Security And Development Act Of 1981," *Cong. Rec.* 127 (1981), 24489

program.³⁷⁸ Whether Helms was coyly referring to the nascent Contra movement is unclear, but he evidently believed that sending money to Nicaragua undermined President Reagan's overall strategy. It would only give the Sandinistas time to consolidate their control and expand the Nicaraguan military. As he bluntly reminded Reagan in a letter two days after the vote, 'Neither you nor I wants to help the Sandinistas'.³⁷⁹

Helms' words could be interpreted as an implicit warning to the president. Helms did not wish to see any slip in the administration's anti-Sandinista strategy, and with Enders pursuing a negotiated settlement track, the senator's letter reminded Reagan that policy should not depart from conservative principles. This was clear from Helms' comments in the same letter regarding the recent arrest of several prominent Nicaraguan businessmen only hours after the aid package passed the Senate. The incident, Helms told Reagan, was 'a direct slap at our attempt to keep the forces of freedom alive in Central America, and a repudiation of your own personal commitment to the principle that development in that region must come from within, most principally through the private sector.'³⁸⁰ Helms felt strongly enough to send the same message to Vice President Bush, personally annotating his letter to tell the vice president, 'George: we simply must try to stop this sort of thing.'³⁸¹

The White House was keen to allay the senator's fears that Nicaragua policy might be slipping. Though Helms did not receive a reply from Reagan, State Department officials drafted a response from the vice

³⁷⁸ Helms, "International Security And Development Act Of 1981," *Cong. Rec.* 127 (1981), 24489.

³⁷⁹ Letter, Senator Jesse Helms to President Reagan, 22 October, 1981, ID045334, CO114, WHORM: Subject File, *RRL*.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁸¹ Letter, Senator Jesse Helms to Vice President Bush, 22 October, 1981, ID051711, CO114, WHORM: Subject File, *RRL*.

president confirming the administration's condemnation of both the arrests and Nicaragua's military build-up. 'Frankly, Senator Helms,' Bush wrote, 'our patience with the Nicaraguan Government is wearing thin.'³⁸² Helms was not alone among the anti-Sandinista network in receiving assurances from the administration. Howard Phillips, executive director of the Conservative Caucus, was told in May 1982 that statements by senior officials 'made it very clear that the Reagan Administration is gravely concerned' by Sandinista actions, and there could not be 'meaningful improvement' in relations 'while those matters are unresolved.'³⁸³

Despite failing to defeat the amendment, Helms demonstrated that he would exercise close scrutiny of Nicaragua policy. His actions maintained pressure for a hard-line Nicaragua policy. The senator also showed few qualms about putting words into the president's mouth, and appeared keen to limit any non-militarised component of the evolving Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua. Finally, in his criticism of the arrest of private sector leaders in Nicaragua, and especially in his comments portraying their detention as a blow to freedom, the senator emphasised the centrality of the free market to his definition of that freedom.

1981 had thus far been a successful year for the anti-Sandinista network, and Helms and his staff maintained this momentum. Carbaugh travelled to Honduras in late November to observe that country's election and attend election night festivities at the U.S. ambassador's residence. Along with several individuals from the aggressively anti-communist American Security Council, Carbaugh met with U.S. ambassador John Negroponte and a senior Honduran officer, Colonel Gustavo Álvarez Martínez. The Honduran had been an active participant in the Contra movement, unofficially backing groups of anti-Sandinista rebels in 1980

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Letter, Edwin Meese III to Howard Phillips, 11 May, 1982, ID074256, CO114, *RRL*.

and meeting with CIA Director William Casey in early 1981 to offer Honduran assets to the cause.³⁸⁴ Christopher Dickey of the *Washington Post*, attending the party at the ambassador's house, believed Negroponte and Álvarez 'could as easily have been celebrating the beginning of a war.'³⁸⁵

More publicly, Helms used his chairmanship of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee to convene hearings on Sandinista human rights abuses. The hearings emerged from Helms' personal contacts in Central America, and demonstrated the influence of his networking on the political discourse in Washington. Helms had spoken with members of the clergy and other observers in Nicaragua that had informed him of Sandinista attacks on Miskito communities in the east. Helms decried 'repeated' incursions into Indian territory and painted a disturbing image of the Sandinistas 'burning entire villages to the ground, burning people alive, burying them alive'. It was, the senator believed, 'a systematic, thorough, and sustained program of extermination.'³⁸⁶ As chair, Helms called on Elliot Abrams, the Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs and a key member of the anti-Sandinista network in his own right. Abrams also offered a harsh indictment of Sandinista behaviour, adding to the argument put forward by Helms and the administration that the Contras were an instrument of human rights promotion.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁴ Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 46 – 49.

³⁸⁵ Christopher Dickey, *With the Contras: A Reporter in the Wilds of Nicaragua* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 125-126.

³⁸⁶ U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Western Hemisphere Affairs Subcommittee, *Human Rights in Nicaragua*, 25 February, 1982, 1.

³⁸⁷ Committee on Foreign Relations, Western Hemisphere Affairs Subcommittee, *Human Rights in Nicaragua*, 6. The validity of the accusations is difficult to ascertain, given that accounts of the relationship between the Miskito and Sandinistas offer no clear conclusion. Andrea Young, for example, representing a fact-finding mission organised by Ramsey Clark, reported to the same hearing that the Sandinistas had

As well as offering the opportunity to voice anti-Sandinista claims, such occasions also acted as networking opportunities in their own right. In this case, the prominent Miskito leader Steadman Fagoth Muller attended the hearings, ostensibly to see how Washington was reacting to the alleged atrocities. Fagoth Mueller was himself a Contra leader, with close ties to the Nicaraguan exile community in Miami and the U.S. military in Honduras.³⁸⁸ Thus the hearings demonstrated the dynamics of Helms' network. The senator received information from the network, and then used this information to convene hearings. These hearings in turn influenced the political discourse in Washington, adding to the growing tendency for Contra advocates to co-opt the language of human rights as part of their framework for the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaraguan policy.

In doing so, Helms reinforced what Carl Bon Tempo has described as the 'centrist-conservative alternative' human rights framework that developed in the 1970s. This vision, crafted with considerable assistance from administration figures like Kirkpatrick and Abrams, as well as sympathetic NGOs such as Freedom House, reflected a neo-conservatism

treated the Miskito population well. Committee on Foreign Relations, Western Hemisphere Affairs Subcommittee, *Human Rights in Nicaragua*, 29-31. For further accounts of Sandinista-Miskito relations, see Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), Charles R. Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894-1987* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), James Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Central America* (London: Verso, 1988), and Philippe Bourgois, "Class, Ethnicity, and the State among the Miskitu Amerindians of Northeastern Nicaragua," *Latin American Perspectives* 8, No. 2, Revolutionary Nicaragua (Spring, 1981): 22-39. Dennis offers an overview of the literature in Philip A. Dennis, "The Miskito-Sandinista Conflict in Nicaragua in the 1980s," *Latin American Research Review* 28, No. 3 (1993): 214-234.

³⁸⁸ Prof. William M LeoGrande, in his own testimony to the hearing, acknowledged Fagoth Mueller's presence, and noted the Miskito leader's own role as a Contra figure and his ties to Nicaraguan exiles in Miami and the U.S. military in Honduras. *Human Rights in Nicaragua*, 50.

that saw human rights within wider Cold War considerations.³⁸⁹ Helms adopted the mantra of human rights in conjunction with democracy promotion, a common adjustment for conservatives in an era when the political right brought the two processes together to form a single foreign policy strategy.³⁹⁰

Though conservatives were forging common ground over using a human rights formula in their anti-Sandinista rhetoric, the outbreak of the Falklands War in April 1982 exposed fractures in the movement's foreign policy, as well as in the wider transnational anti-Sandinista network. Latin American militaries reacted negatively to Reagan's support for Britain during the conflict.³⁹¹ Gustavo Álvarez Martínez accused Washington of betraying its allies and ignoring the Monroe Doctrine.³⁹² With a rift between the U.S. and its regional allies threatening to undermine the Contra programme, the anti-Sandinista network sought to stabilise the situation. Carbaugh travelled to Miami and met with conservative allies, such as anti-Sandinista exile José Francisco Cardenal and the head of the Argentine Contra support programme Oswaldo Ribeiro, in order to reassure the Hondurans and Argentines that the latter were still very much wanted as partners.³⁹³ Jeane Kirkpatrick, Reagan's Ambassador to the United Nations and a reliable ally of Helms, drew criticism from British officials for attending a function at the Argentine embassy in Washington as the invasion commenced and subsequently suggesting that Argentine

³⁸⁹ Carl J. Bon Tempo, "From the Centre-Right: Freedom House and Human Rights in the 1970s and 1980s," in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History*, ed. Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 233-238.

³⁹⁰ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 216-217.

³⁹¹ John Maclean, "Falklands war costly to U.S. Latin policy," *Chicago Tribune*, 9 May, 1982, A6.

³⁹² Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 105.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 106.

actions did not amount to outright aggression, given doubts over the sovereignty of the Falklands.³⁹⁴ Her efforts, according to the British, suggested a duplicitous U.S. policy that differed in private from Secretary of State Alexander Haig's public policy.³⁹⁵

Meanwhile, Helms offered vocal support to the Argentines. He was the lone dissenting vote on a 29 April Senate resolution that declared that the U.S. 'cannot stand neutral' and would seek 'to achieve the full withdrawal of Argentine forces'. Helms presented himself as a hemispheric voice, stating that 'I hope no nations in Central or South America will interpret this as being a slap in the face.'³⁹⁶

Later in the conflict, especially after the sinking of the *Belgrano* and *H.M.S. Sheffield*, when some conservatives began to express more open discontent about U.S. support for Britain, the senator was heralded for his early criticism of the administration's abandonment of neutrality. John McLaughlin, a former adviser to President Nixon and a strong advocate of rigid neutrality during the Falklands War, wrote in *National Review* that

³⁹⁴ Jane Rosen, "Haig's internal feuding aggravates US rift with Britain," *Guardian*, 7 June, 1982, 2, Steven Rattners, "U.S. Handling of Falkland Crisis Stirs Deep Resentment in Britain," *The New York Times*, 17 April, 1982, 1, and Ray Moseley, "America's 'even hand' not Britons' cup of tea," *Chicago Tribune*, 16 April, 1982, A8. Also in attendance at the event were Elliot Abrams and U.S. Ambassador to the Organisation of American States J. William Middendorf II. Middendorf was particularly close to Helms' aide Deborah DeMoss, who was like an 'adopted daughter' to the ambassador and who frequently visited his offices. Jim Anderson, *United Press International*, 7 April, 1982, and Robert Drexler, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 19 March, 1996, *ADST*.

³⁹⁵ Alexander M. Haig Jr., *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1984), 269.

³⁹⁶ Margot Hornblower, "Senate Resolution Sides With Britain," *Washington Post*, 30 April, 1982, A24. Helms remained a strong supporter of the Argentine perspective throughout the 1980s. In 1987 he argued that the British ambassador's 'arrogance' and refusal to negotiate had prolonged the conflict. Jesse Helms (NC), "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1988 and 1989," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 24414.

many who had quietly shared Helms' fears at the onset of hostilities were heralding the senator as 'prescient'.³⁹⁷ Yet while that publication advocated a greater consideration of U.S. interests in Latin America, Smith Hempstone, writing in *Human Events*, declared the United States 'must side with the British' out of 'equity and self-interest'.³⁹⁸ The magazine offered little commentary on events in the South Atlantic, suggesting it had failed to fully reconcile competing imperatives.

Carbaugh claimed that it was his influence, rather than Helms' own perspective, which prompted the senator to defend Argentina, and argued he had used Helms to sustain the relationship between the various anti-Sandinista elements within Latin America.³⁹⁹ However, he was probably overstating his influence. Helms was deeply concerned about the threat to anti-Sandinista policies posed by the Falklands War.⁴⁰⁰ The senator's support for the Contras was based on unwavering anti-communist principles, and on principle, he declared in his memoir, one should never yield.⁴⁰¹ Helms' bold move in openly opposing the president reflected his prioritisation of the Contras and demonstrated that even when Reagan was willing to temporarily forego his eponymous doctrine in favour of other considerations, others pressed ahead regardless.

This intractable commitment to the Contras was increasingly out of step with both congressional and public opinion, and the programme began

³⁹⁷ John McLaughlin, "Tilting Toward Britain," *National Review*, 28 May, 1982, 611. The publication also described any Argentine perception of a U.S. tilt toward Britain as a 'strategically negative development.' See "Rule Britannia?" *National Review*, 30 April, 1982, 467.

³⁹⁸ Smith Hempstone, "Moscow Stands to Gain on Falklands Issue," *Human Events*, 1 May, 1982, 5.

³⁹⁹ Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 106.

⁴⁰⁰ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 244.

⁴⁰¹ Helms, *Here's Where I Stand*, 64.

to run into turbulence. Media reports questioning the size and goals of the CIA's programme elicited concern among lawmakers, and, in response to the negative headlines, Congress passed legislation in December 1982 which explicitly prohibited the U.S. from providing aid that would be used for overthrowing the Sandinistas.⁴⁰²

The Boland Amendment was the start of sixteen months of damage control for the anti-Sandinista network that culminated in early 1984 with a public furore over the CIA's mining of Nicaraguan harbours the previous winter. It also offered an opportunity for Helms to more fully articulate his own perspective on the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua. Helms condemned the Boland Amendment and those who voted for it, arguing that Congress was negligent in the fight against communist expansion in Central America.⁴⁰³ Yet he could not stop the legislation, largely because Republican leaders, fearful of Rep. Tom Harkin's (D – IA) more restrictive alternative, pragmatically accepted Boland's language.⁴⁰⁴ Many members sympathetic to the president's policy also justified their vote for the amendment on the grounds that the legislation was meaningless, since Reagan had never proclaimed that U.S. policy was aimed at removing the Sandinistas.⁴⁰⁵

In the aftermath of the amendment, faced with an increasingly hostile Congress, Helms sought to build support for the Reagan Doctrine by linking a weakened anti-communist strategy in Central America to domestic concerns. In March 1983, citing correspondence from Nat Hamrick, the senator argued that twenty million refugees would flood into the U.S. if

⁴⁰² LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 302-304.

⁴⁰³ U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua and Central America*, 12 April, 1983, 27.

⁴⁰⁴ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 303 – 304.

⁴⁰⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 111 – 112.

events in Central America continued on their present course.⁴⁰⁶ A month later, in a Foreign Relations Committee meeting on Nicaragua policy, the senator repeated the claim.⁴⁰⁷ When the Senate debated immigration reform in May, Helms was even more dramatic. The United States was facing a potential ‘explosion of “feet people”’, he warned, because of continued ‘Soviet expansionism’ in Central America.⁴⁰⁸

If Helms was seeking to shore up conservative support for the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua, referring to a possible immigration crisis was a logical tactic. Conservatives, particularly those in the Sun Belt, feared a surge of illegal immigrants that would intensify the existing pattern of Latino immigration into the area.⁴⁰⁹ From what Christopher Dickey describes as ‘deep-seated, Ventura County, California, conservatism’, several disciples of which served in the Reagan administration, to right-wing Floridians wary of unchecked immigration because of the recent Mariel boatlift from Cuba, southern conservatives looked with trepidation at an immigrant threat to the social and economic fabric of their region.⁴¹⁰

Yet Helms’ commentary was not aimed solely at conservatives, nor even southerners. His allusion to an impending immigration boom spoke to

⁴⁰⁶ Jesse Helms (NC), “Negotiations in El Salvador,” *Cong. Rec.* 129 (1983), 6664.

⁴⁰⁷ Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua and Central America*, 30.

⁴⁰⁸ Jesse Helms (NC), “Immigration Reform And Control Act Of 1983,” *Cong. Rec.* 129 (1983), 12365.

⁴⁰⁹ Lyman A. Kellstedt and James L. Guth, “Religion and Political Behavior in the Sunbelt,” in *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Space, Place, and Region*, Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 119.

⁴¹⁰ Christopher Dickey, “Central America: From Quagmire to Cauldron?” *Foreign Affairs* 62, No. 3, America and the World 1983 (1983), 661.

a growing national anti-immigration sentiment in the early 1980s.⁴¹¹ In particular, growing numbers of Latin America migrants had contributed to what Leo Chavez describes as a Latino threat narrative, in which members of this group were deemed an especially high risk to the nation's security and Anglo-American homogeneity.⁴¹² Helms deployed, and reinforced, several linguistic tropes that Otto Santa Ana sees as critical to the language of the immigration debate, including the depiction of immigrants as a water-based threat ('floods') and as a damaging physical force on the national body ('explosion').⁴¹³ In doing so, Helms, as Stephen Macekura notes, was influential in shaping 'normative definitions of "American"' – those who could be legally and culturally assimilated into the United States.⁴¹⁴

Helms used this pervasive fear to justify aid to the Contras throughout the 1980s. In 1987, for example, Helms told Senate colleagues that:

They [Central Americans] will walk north. They will come into our country, seeking and yearning for freedom – people who cannot speak English, who have no jobs or home, or anything else except that yearning for freedom. They will go on welfare, they will impact upon our schools and other institutions... The American people should consider the impact of that... if this

⁴¹¹ Bill Ong Hing, *Defining America Through Immigration Policy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 155, and Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 242.

⁴¹² Leo R. Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 23

⁴¹³ For a discussion on the rhetoric of Latino immigration, see Otto Santa Ana, *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in Contemporary American Public Discourse* (Austin: University of Texas, 2002).

⁴¹⁴ Stephen Macekura, "For Fear of Persecution": Displaced Salvadorans and U.S. Refugee Policy in the 1980s," *Journal of Policy History* 23, No. 3, (2011), 364.

Nation does not stand by those who are willing to fight and die for freedom in Central America.’⁴¹⁵

Helms’ strategy was assisted by the high issue salience of immigration, and its ability to foster unlikely consensus among domestic constituencies in the United States.⁴¹⁶ As such, it held out the possibility of a major re-orientation of domestic attitudes toward the Reagan Doctrine, shifting emphasis away from its polarising anti-Sandinista framework toward an anti-immigration consensus. As LeoGrande notes in relation to the sudden mass Cuban migration wave of the early 1990s, the rapid influx of disaffected Cubans into southern Florida not only mobilised that region’s opinion but also that of a wider American public deeply concerned about immigration. President Clinton’s policy responses were constrained by this reaction: level two domestic concerns, to use Putnam’s two-level game theory, took priority, because he had to consider the wider (anti-immigration) public’s reaction and not just the views of anti-Castro émigrés in Florida who favoured an open door policy toward Cuba.⁴¹⁷

In Nicaragua, therefore, immigration concerns were potentially highly useful for reinforcing the shaky foundation of the Reagan Doctrine. As

⁴¹⁵ Jesse Helms (NC), “Disapproval Of Certain Assistance To The Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance,” *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 6084.

⁴¹⁶ Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 35.

⁴¹⁷ William M. LeoGrande, “From Havana to Miami: U.S. Cuba Policy as a Two-Level Game,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 40, No. 1 (Spring, 1998), 79. Putnam’s two-level theory posits that international leaders face ‘two “tables”, one representing domestic politics and the other international negotiation. Diplomatic tactics and strategies are constrained simultaneously by what other states will accept and what domestic constituencies will ratify.’ Andrew Moravcsik, “Introduction: Integrating International and Domestic Theories of International Bargaining,” in *Double-Edged Diplomacy: International Bargaining and Domestic Politics*, eds. Peter B. Evans, Harold K. Jacobson, and Robert D. Putnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 4. Putnam outlined his argument in “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization* 42, No. 3 (Summer, 1998): 427-460.

Robert Pastor points out in his own two-level analysis of the Reagan administration's Nicaragua policy, which can be extended to the anti-Sandinista network more generally, the administration failed to persuade a domestic constituency, at least during the Boland period, that the Contras were legitimate freedom fighters helping to overcome an unfriendly government.⁴¹⁸ Without an accommodation with its level two constituents, the network's policy faltered and Boland's legislation was enacted. Helms looked to fix this by reshaping the Contras, remoulding them as a kind of pre-emptive border control force that would contain immigration at its source by destroying the communist repression behind mass migration of Central Americans. If it were successful, domestic and foreign policy constituencies could conceivably find a common ground, potentially making Contra aid far more viable.

Part of the reason why the senator incorporated Central America into his immigration narrative was the primary role played by Congress in shaping immigration policy in this period. 1983 not only saw legislative restriction on the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua, but it also marked a new round of political struggle on Capitol Hill over immigration reform. Reagan had not given the issue significant priority, and his senior advisers, divided over the issue, struggled to formulate a coherent message from those policy suggestions the president did give.⁴¹⁹ Led by Alan Simpson (R-WY) in the Senate and Ramano Mazzoli (D-KY) in the House, Congress thus took the reins. The policy window resulting from the absence of executive leadership, further widened by the salience of immigration concern to the public and the rising instability in Central America, meant that the senator

⁴¹⁸ Robert Pastor, "The United States and Central America: Interlocking Debates," in *Double-Edged Diplomacy: International Bargaining and Domestic Politics*, eds. Peter B. Evans, Harold K. Jacobson, and Robert D. Putnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 325.

⁴¹⁹ Thomas R. Maddux, "Ronald Reagan and the Task Force on Immigration, 1981," *Pacific Historical Review* 74, No. 2 (May, 2005), 197-198. See also Nicholas Laham, *Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Immigration Reform* (Westport: Praeger, 2000).

had an opportunity to shape immigration policy and foreign affairs simultaneously.

Helms continued to believe that only an aggressive paramilitary interpretation of the Reagan Doctrine would prevent wider disorder in the hemisphere, hence his defence of the administration when Congress learned of the CIA's mining operation in early 1984. He lauded those who he felt were 'working for the best interests of the Nicaraguan people and of all the people in the region' and declared that 'whatever role, if any, may have been played by U.S. officials should not blind us to the fundamental truth that what we should do is applaud.'⁴²⁰

The problem for the anti-Sandinista alliance was that the damaging publicity from the mining scandal added to the growing concern surrounding the president's Contra policy. Helms' defence of the mining operation strengthened his image as a consistent advocate of paramilitary engagement with the Sandinistas, and provided a welcome, if isolated, point of support for the Reagan administration during a period of intense difficulty, but at the same time it highlighted the growing distance between his views on Nicaragua and those of a general public that was largely opposed to Contra aid.⁴²¹

Reagan's first term saw a determined effort by the network to develop, and maintain, a viable anti-Sandinista army. Helms provided outspoken and sustained support for the programme, defining the issue in stark, Manichean terms. Meanwhile, lower profile members of the community worked diligently to develop the regional anti-communist alliance that supported the Contras. This tendency to rely on the hard-line

⁴²⁰ Jesse Helms (NC), "Miscellaneous Tariff, Trade, And Customs Matters," *Cong. Rec.* 130 (1984), 8531-8532.

⁴²¹ Bowen, "Presidential Action," 797; Richard Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy Since Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111.

element of hemispheric anti-communism generated a vicious circle, since the policies being advocated – and implemented – reduced the chances of constructive engagement with a Congress that was sharply divided over the Contra issue. As Ted Draper concludes in his examination of the Iran-Contra affairs, it was this hard-line group – ‘people with their own agenda’, as he terms it – who ultimately created the scandal.⁴²² Helms and his network, working on their own agenda, played an integral role in heightening the contentious political, and policy, environment from which Iran-Contra would emerge.

In late 1984, Congress passed the second Boland Amendment, explicitly terminating all Contra aid. By the middle of the following year, legislators had voted to renew humanitarian aid, authorising \$27 million to sustain the rebels pending the restoration of military support. The next year, Reagan achieved even greater success, securing \$100 million in military funding for the Contras. The appropriation of so large a quantity of unrestricted aid – designed to provide the Contras with an arsenal capable of defeating the Sandinistas – marked the pinnacle of the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua. Within months, however, the policy would be ruined by the Iran-Contra affair. It was during these years that Helms demonstrated both the effectiveness and dangers of partisan policy entrepreneurship.

The passage of the second Boland Amendment was a low-point for Reagan’s Contra policy. As with the first Boland Amendment, Helms was unable to stop the legislation. He could not resist the potent combination of congressional anger at executive branch unilateralism, lack of public support for the Contras, and Republican willingness to sacrifice aid in order to secure the funding of popular domestic programmes during an election year.⁴²³ Hard-line anti-Sandinista figures in Washington, notably William

⁴²² Draper, *Very Thing Line*, 25.

⁴²³ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 343 – 345 and Arnson, *Crossroads*, 178 – 180.

Casey, Oliver North, and John McFarlane, had been aware of the growing resentment towards Contra policy, and during the preceding months had taken steps to ensure a sustainable flow of aid to the rebels.⁴²⁴ Though such efforts were still legal at this point, the search for alternative funding planted the seeds for Iran-Contra. Helms had no direct link to these initiatives, though John Carbaugh was tied to the scheme. Carbaugh, who was fired by Helms in 1982 for ethics violations relating to the misuse of funds for travel, was named as a prospective member of an advisory board for a new tax-exempt corporation through which funds to the Contras could be moved.⁴²⁵ Carbaugh was also listed in North's schedule for 26 September 1984.⁴²⁶ Though there is no mention of the content of their meeting, the likelihood of it concerning efforts to continue Contra assistance was substantial given the previous actions of both participants. It was during this period that North embarked upon his plan to secure secret, third party funding for the Contras; an endeavour that paid off in the wake of the second Boland Amendment, but which would ultimately lead to a catastrophic collapse of the Contra programme.

⁴²⁴ Theodore Draper, in his exhaustive account of the Iran-Contra scandals, points to summer 1984 as the period in which the administration began to seek out private funding for the anti-Sandinista rebels. Casey, as CIA Director, McFarlane, as National Security Adviser, and North, the National Security Council's point man for the Contras, were intimately involved in this process. Draper, *A Very Thin Line*, 37.

⁴²⁵ [Proposal for the creation of a 501(c)(3) Tax-Exempt Non-Profit Corporation to Raise and Transfer Funds to the Contras], Project Proposal, c. 1 March, 1984, *DNSA*.

⁴²⁶ [North Schedule for September 26, 1984], Non-Classified, North Schedule, 26 September, 1984, *DNSA*.

El Salvador, 1979-1992

In October 1979, El Salvador's ruling junta was ousted in a coup led by a young, reformist faction of the nation's armed forces. Barely three months later, in January 1980, another coup brought a new government to power. Violence soared, as Marxist insurgents, El Salvador's armed forces, and brutal paramilitary death squads from both sides of the political spectrum fought for control of the small, impoverished Central American nation. At the start of 1981, the insurgency, recently united under the banner of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), launched a "Final Offensive" to seize control of the state, in imitation of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The offensive failed, and for the next twelve years the government of El Salvador and the FMLN engaged in a bitter struggle settled only when a U.N. mediated peace process brought the war to a close.

During the entire conflict, as well as those months immediately preceding the civil war itself, the United States looked to stabilise a Salvadoran government that consistently proved incapable of decisively countering the FMLN. The Carter administration initially sought to use El Salvador as a test case for its human rights policy, but relented in the face of FMLN advances. By the end of his presidency, Carter had authorised renewed military aid, further distancing himself from two of the oft-stated frameworks for his foreign policy: détente and moralism. President Reagan maintained this approach, but drastically increased the size of the aid. Between 1981 and 1988, the United States provided hundreds of millions of dollars for El Salvador's military, but failed to turn the Salvadoran army into one capable of winning the civil war. George Bush's administration adopted a more pragmatic framework, and embraced the internationally-

mediated peace process that emerged in the early 1990s as a means of drawing an end to the divisive issue of U.S. involvement in El Salvador.⁴²⁷

For Jesse Helms, all this was utterly insufficient. From early 1980 until the peace accords, he consistently opposed U.S. policy in El Salvador. He had no patience for the Carter administration's policies, and little for President Reagan's.⁴²⁸ Military assistance was too small, and the economic reforms demanded by the United States in return for security aid were barely distinguishable from socialism. Helms accepted his differences with the Carter administration, but he, like other movement conservatives, was baffled by the Reagan administration's approach to El Salvador. His criticism of the administration, albeit couched in anti-CIA and State Department rhetoric, exposed deep misgivings among movement conservatives about the manner in which Reagan was implementing a conservative foreign policy in El Salvador.

The senator's distinctive policy vision was illustrated in his dogmatic approach to two critically important figures in the Salvadoran policy landscape: U.S. Ambassador Robert White and the right-wing Salvadoran political leader, Major Roberto D'Aubuisson. Helms used White as a prop in a broader assault on the Carter administration's policies, which the senator depicted as overly pre-occupied with human rights considerations. Despite Carter's noticeable shift in the final months of his presidency toward a more militarised approach, Helms consistently presented White's more radically reformist views as the basis of U.S. policy. Assisted by the prominent role played by the American ambassador in El

⁴²⁷ For more on El Salvador's civil war, see Hugh Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996), William Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elites Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), and Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador* (New York: Times Books, 1984).

⁴²⁸ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 245.

Salvador during this period, Helms' fight over policy became, in essence, a conflict between himself and Ambassador White.

D'Aubuisson, on the other hand, was Helms' most important ally – Salvadoran or American – in the campaign to ensure a sufficiently conservative policy. D'Aubuisson, a former Salvadoran intelligence officer turned political candidate for the right-wing ARENA party, was abhorred by almost all American officials during the period. He was closely associated with the extreme right's death squad campaign, and American policy-makers saw his political career as a means of legitimising the far right's repressive anti-communist strategy and perpetuating the socio-economic status quo. Helms, however, isolated from the Reagan administration, embraced D'Aubuisson's politics precisely because of these factors. Though D'Aubuisson's rise to political prominence directly challenged American policy, the senator consistently championed the Salvadoran's cause.

D'Aubuisson, however, was an isolated ally for the senator. Unlike policy in Nicaragua during the same period, Helms could not build a broad network of conservative policy advocates and activists. The Carter, Reagan, and Bush administrations largely maintained their commitment to moderate political forces in El Salvador, and this hampered the senator's ability to enlist administration insiders as part of his policy efforts. Movement conservative allies like *Human Events* and several congressional conservatives helped sustain Helms' narrative for El Salvador up to a point, but altering policy was difficult when the bureaucracy was largely hostile to the senator's preferences.

'A torch tossed in a pool of oil': Helms and the Carter Administration

For Helms, El Salvador emerged as an important foreign policy issue when it began to destabilise in 1979 and early 1980. Prior to this, as had been the case in Nicaragua under Somoza rule, the senator paid little

attention to a reliable anti-communist ally. The emergence of a unified communist guerrilla front and the potential for another Sandinista-esque revolution in Central America, however, caught Helms' attention. When the Special Central American and Caribbean Security Assistance Act came before the Senate in January 1980, Helms argued that El Salvador should be the 'primary recipient' of aid in the region because of the threat it faced. Praising El Salvador for its long history of friendship with, and support for, the United States, Helms argued that assistance for the Central American nation should be increased to \$20,000,000 – funded, as previously discussed, by a significant reduction in the Carter administration's aid package for the new Sandinista government in Nicaragua.⁴²⁹

Helms' amendment reflected the American right's regional threat assessment carried out in the wake of the Somoza government's ouster. For six months, since the intensification of the Nicaraguan crisis, movement conservatives had predicted El Salvador's imminent collapse should the Carter administration maintain its existing course.⁴³⁰ Prioritising El Salvador as a beneficiary of American aid was intended to assuage these fears, and emphasised Helms' personal interest in re-ordering policy in Central America to better reflect a conservative analysis of the region's problems.

Helms' plan was not without support from those outside the movement conservative base. Ed Zorinsky (D-NE), chair of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee and a frequent target of conservative ire, said that he would have had sympathy for both Helms' analysis and his proposal had it not simultaneously curtailed the administration's Nicaragua policy.

⁴²⁹ Helms, "Special Central American And Caribbean Security Assistance Act Of 1979," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 1084.

⁴³⁰ Martin Arostegui, "Will El Salvador Fall Next?" *Human Events*, 11 August, 1979, 10, "Carter Shake-up Covers Disastrous Foreign Policy Defeat," *Human Events*, 4 August, 1979, 1, and Robert Peter, "Moscow Reaches for America's Slim Waist," *National Review*, 20 July, 1979, 920-935.

Nicaragua's current needs, Zorinsky said, were the issue at hand.⁴³¹ Given the wider support in the Senate for Carter's conciliatory tone toward the Sandinistas, Helms' amendment suffered a substantial defeat, 61-26.⁴³²

The senator's January remarks reinforced the view that the preservation of stability was his fundamental objective for American policy in Central America. Stability 'is the prime U.S. interest there. All other considerations are secondary', he argued. 'When internal stability is restored in each country, then, and only then, can the United States talk with its friends about other internal problems which have human rights implications.'⁴³³ Yet while he and conservatives lambasted the Carter administration for prioritising human rights, Helms' position was actually closer to that of the White House than either party admitted. Conscious of El Salvador's mounting instability, the White House studiously avoided pleas from the State Department's human rights bureau that it continue restricting military aid.⁴³⁴ For all the president's talk of human rights, the traditional Cold War imperatives of national security re-emerged as the driving force behind policy.⁴³⁵

Thus, the difference between Helms and the administration was not a matter of strategy in El Salvador, but tactics. Helms' \$20,000,000 aid proposal was four times that requested by Carter, and unlike the

⁴³¹ Edward Zorinsky (NE), "Special Central American And Caribbean Security Assistance Act Of 1979," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 1085.

⁴³² "Rollcall Vote No. 16 Leg.," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 1087.

⁴³³ Helms, "Special Central American And Caribbean Security Assistance Act Of 1979," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 1085.

⁴³⁴ Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit*, 164-167 and 171-175.

⁴³⁵ Michael McClintock, *The American Connection, Volume 1: State Terror and Popular Resistance in El Salvador* (London: Zed Books, 1985), 330, and Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counter-Terrorism, 1940-1990* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 327.

administration, he did not use the language of human rights as pressure on El Salvador's military to conduct a publicly palatable counterinsurgency operation. The greatest difference in tactics, however, stemmed from the Carter administration's choice of Robert E. White as ambassador in El Salvador. Helms' vision of stability for the country – a robust anti-communist counterinsurgency strategy alongside the preservation of existing socio-economic structures – clashed with White's preferences for economic and political reform. In White, Helms found a nemesis against which he could rally conservatives in support of a more militarised anti-communist strategy.

White was a long-serving Latin Americanist in the Foreign Service, having served in various posts in the region for eighteen years prior to his appointment in El Salvador. Though he had been identified as a replacement for Frank Devine in late 1979, the desire for a more experienced hand saw the interim appointment of James Cheek.⁴³⁶ At the start of 1980, as the Carter administration looked to construct a viable, sustainable political centre in order to break the oligarchy's hold on El Salvador's political life, White's name was put forward as an individual who might be able to persuade the junta to pursue socio-economic reform.⁴³⁷

Helms was aghast at the decision. White's nomination, he declared, was 'like a torch tossed in a pool of oil.'⁴³⁸ For almost a month Helms worked to block the ambassador's confirmation. He initially delayed the process by filing an extensive series of questions for the ambassador concerning both El Salvador and the wider regional context.⁴³⁹ Extensive

⁴³⁶ Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit*, 166.

⁴³⁷ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 43.

⁴³⁸ Jesse Helms (NC), "Nomination Of Robert E. White To Be Ambassador To El Salvador," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 4737.

⁴³⁹ "Questions for Ambassador-Designate to El Salvador White," [Questions from Senator Jesse Helms], Letter, 6 February, 1980, *Digital National*

questioning of a nominee was a common tactic for Helms, allowing him to seek out a candidate's positions but also add to the apprehension of those who came under his spotlight.⁴⁴⁰ Next, he voted against White's nomination in the Foreign Relations Committee, with only Richard Lugar joining in this show of dissent.⁴⁴¹ When the full Senate assembled to vote on the nomination, Helms not only led the opposition with a lengthy denunciation of White's career, ideology, and character, but he sought to block the Democratic leadership's attempt to expedite the confirmation by bringing it to the head of the legislative calendar. Despite these efforts, Helms was isolated, and White was dispatched to his post with overwhelming Senate support. Only Helms and sixteen other conservative senators voted against the nomination.⁴⁴²

Helms' campaign against White was more than just a matter of personality politics. It represented an attempt to wrest control of the bureaucracy away from those perceived by conservatives as dangerous liberal activists – even, to some, insidious communist sympathisers. At the same time, it served as a demonstration of what Helms and the movement stood for in El Salvador, and showed once again the senator's continuing desire to place his colleagues on the record on terms defined by his own provocative rhetoric.

Diplomats were wary of written questions during the confirmation process. Ambassador Denis Lamb recalled that those from Helms could

Security Archive (hereafter *DNSA*), and “[Congressional Questions regarding El Salvador],” Letter, 14 February, 1980, *DNSA*.

⁴⁴⁰ Miles S. Pendleton, Jr., interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 22 June, 1998, *ADST*.

⁴⁴¹ “White Backed for Salvador Post,” *The New York Times*, 22 February, 1980, B16.

⁴⁴² “Rollcall Vote No. 56 Ex.,” *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 4741.

involve 'serious jeopardy'.⁴⁴³ White, who later became accustomed to the senator's attempts to trap him through what he once described as 'disingenuous' queries, was subjected to a series of confrontational and leading questions.⁴⁴⁴ Like his preference for constructing rigidly defined legislation choices that framed Senate debate on his terms, Helms' questions drew White onto ground chosen by the senator. He sought answers that forced the ambassador into either confirming the conservative narrative over El Salvador or expressing support for policies and nations that Helms saw as inimical to the United States' interests.

Helms was keen for White to validate the conservative narrative of a crisis driven by external communist intervention, particularly from Nicaragua, Panama, and Cuba. He pressed the ambassador on the role of these nations in supporting the insurgency, and queried why White appeared to dismiss reports of foreign influence on the guerrillas.⁴⁴⁵ When not buttressing the case for aggressive communist expansion in El Salvador, Helms questioned White's faith in the reforms promised by the Carter administration and junta in El Salvador, especially those which American conservatives believed to have destroyed El Salvador's previously burgeoning economy. To counter the emerging consensus that El Salvador required reform, Helms queried the success of nations he believed had worked within similar frameworks (and he included a less-than-subtle criticism of communist revolutionary priorities in the process):

⁴⁴³ Denis Lamb, interview by Ray Ewing, 29 September, 2009, *ADST*.

⁴⁴⁴ "Request from Senator Jesse Helms Re Leftist Coup Plotting," Limited Official Use, Cable, 4939, 15 July, 1980, *DNSA*.

⁴⁴⁵ "Questions for Ambassador-Designate to El Salvador White," [Questions from Senator Jesse Helms], Letter, 6 February, 1980, *DNSA*, and "[Congressional Questions regarding El Salvador]," Letter, 14 February, 1980, *DNSA*.

28. What is the estimated per capita income in Nicaragua today? What was the estimated per capita income in Nicaragua two years ago? (in constant dollars)

29. What was Cuba's relative economic position based on standards of living in Latin America in 1958? What is Cuba's relative standard of living in Latin America today?

What do you attribute this decline to? What does it suggest concerning the marxist economic model as a vehicle for raising the living standards of people in Latin America? What does it suggest concerning the willingness of marxist leaders to allocate budgetary resources to exporting revolution at the expense of the living standard of people?⁴⁴⁶

White's responses led Helms to condemn the ambassador as a 'divisive force' and 'an ideologue', ill suited for a country in need of an American ambassador with 'reason and compassion' who might 'heal that country's wounds [and] bring its divisions back together again.'⁴⁴⁷ Such rhetoric was a thin disguise. It was not that White was an ideologue, but rather than he epitomised an ideology alien to the senator. Their clash was a product of their contrasting opinions on the causes of the crisis and the best course to solve it. Even at the most basic level they disagreed on how to describe the situation. When White told Helms that he hoped civil war might be avoided, Helms responded by pointing out every analysis showed the country to be already in the midst of civil war. 'Nothing', Helms told

⁴⁴⁶ "Questions for Ambassador-Designate to El Salvador White," [Questions from Senator Jesse Helms], Letter, 6 February, 1980, *DNSA*.

⁴⁴⁷ Helms, "Nomination Of Robert E. White To Be Ambassador To El Salvador," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 4733-4737, and "[Congressional Questions regarding El Salvador]," Letter, 14 February, 1980, *DNSA*.

White, 'is gained by trying to pretend that the nation is not under attack by a bitter and irreconcilable ideology.'⁴⁴⁸

On the causes of the insurgency, the senator described the class-based analysis that the ambassador allegedly adhered to as a 'crude caricature'. It was a 'mythology' put forward by 'rabblers' in the U.S., Helms claimed, and, indicating support for the oligarchs and economic elites of the country, argued 'is not going to win the confidence of the very men with the capital and expertise necessary to put El Salvador back into working order.' In place of White's 'tedious rhetoric of class warfare' and support for 'murky proposals to turn El Salvador's economic system sharply toward socialism', Helms proposed policies he heard discussed every day in the Senate: 'capital formation, job creation, reinvestment, and private enterprise.'⁴⁴⁹

Helms therefore made White's nomination a symbolic vote over El Salvador policy, and even the basic tenets of American democracy. 'We have to decide whether we believe in our own system', he argued on the Senate floor. 'If any Senator thinks that socialism is the answer, then he will vote for Ambassador White', Helms stated. 'If he thinks that another Cuba, or another Nicaragua, is the answer, then let him tell that to his constituents by voting for Mr. White.'⁴⁵⁰ Helms stated clearly that his purpose was to put his colleagues' views on record, as much for the future as for the present. 'I am on my feet in an empty Senate Chamber today, making a record – because, a few years from now, I think I shall be

⁴⁴⁸ "[Congressional Questions regarding El Salvador]," Letter, 14 February, 1980, *DNSA*.

⁴⁴⁹ Helms, "Nomination Of Robert E. White To Be Ambassador To El Salvador," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 4733-4734.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4738.

somewhat comforted to look back and say, “Well, I tried. I tried to warn my colleagues.”⁴⁵¹

Helms’ admission about his lack of audience says much about the importance he attached to building a record of policy positions, and the symbolic nature of speeches in the Senate. As Hill and Hurley note, general policy speeches by senators provide signals to their constituents and policy groups, making them part of their ‘preservation of self.’⁴⁵² In this case, far from persuading his fellow legislators, Helms simply constructed a record of his personal commitment to a conservative position. His argument that at least ‘I tried’ was a good example of this self-preservation process at work.

It was Helms’ effort to construct a record of his views that makes his Senate speech opposing White of critical importance in understanding his perspective on both El Salvador and international instability in the period. Helms saw an established order under threat from ‘middle-class intellectuals who have substituted ideology for reality’, backed by ‘training, arms, and tactics provided by organized international movements.’⁴⁵³ The tenets of Salvadoran life that Helms believed critical to any well-run society – the free-market, private property, existing structures of law and order – were threatened by the implementation of ‘ideology over economics.’ In an echo of his defence of the Somoza government, Helms acknowledged some weaknesses in the Salvadoran leadership: ‘I have no doubt that the leadership of El Salvador has about the same proportion of miscreants as would be found in any sample of human beings in any country anywhere in

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 4734.

⁴⁵² Kim Quaile Hill and Patricia A. Hurley, “Symbolic Speeches in the U.S. Senate and Their Representational Implications,” *The Journal of Politics* 64, No. 1 (February, 2002), 221.

⁴⁵³ Helms, “Nomination of Robert E. White To Be Ambassador To El Salvador,” *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 4735.

the world'.⁴⁵⁴ However, he did not hold to the view, widely held by both his contemporaries and later historians, that it was the established alliance between the country's agro-elites and military that had exploited a population to its breaking point.⁴⁵⁵

It would be a mistake, however, to see Helms' actions only as symbolic. This was a real effort to control the levers of influence. Delaying White's confirmation was designed to force the administration to withdraw the nomination. Reports reached Robert Pastor, Latin America expert for the NSC, that John Carbaugh was reportedly set to travel to El Salvador to persuade the governing junta that White should be declared *persona non grata* even before his confirmation. By delaying the vote, Helms would extend the timeframe for Carbaugh's operation, maximising the chances that the Salvadorans would reject the ambassador even before the Senate vote. Pastor recommended Byrd speed up the confirmation timetable, an idea that Brzezinski agreed with.⁴⁵⁶

Helms feared that White was likely to be highly influential in El Salvador – more so than any other ambassadorial posting. White had a reputation for obstinacy and activism, and the senator worried that the ambassador would continue the State Department's long history of 'unparalleled and arrogant intervention' in El Salvador.⁴⁵⁷ Helms believed any mistake on the ambassador's part 'could result in the loss of yet

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 4734.

⁴⁵⁵ For examples, see Stanley, *The Protection Racket State*, and Jeffrey M. Paige, "Coffee and Power in El Salvador," *Latin American Research Review* 28, No. 3 (1993): 7-40.

⁴⁵⁶ Memo, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 21 February, 1980, folder "[Meetings – SCC 279: 2/27/80]," Box 32, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, JCL.

⁴⁵⁷ Helms, "Nomination of Robert E. White To Be Ambassador To El Salvador," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 4733.

another Central American nation to Marxist dictatorship.⁴⁵⁸ His senatorial colleagues, who told White to act less as an ambassador and more as an American proconsul, stoked Helms' fears that White represented a law unto himself. Perhaps worst of all for the senator, the White House, distracted by the Iranian hostage situation and domestic troubles, had granted White substantial latitude to implement policy as he saw fit.⁴⁵⁹

Helms was not alone in his condemnation of White. Senator Gordon Humphrey (R-NH) placed his own hold on the nomination because he disagreed with White's alleged sympathies for Cuba and the ambassador's refusal to hold external actors to blame for the Salvadoran crisis.⁴⁶⁰ In April, *Human Events* declared its opposition to White, too. Its assessment that the ambassador was part of the administration's 'encouragement of socialism' in Central America helped spread Helms' message through the wider conservative movement, and the periodical praised the senator for his leadership role in scrutinising White's confirmation.⁴⁶¹ The comparative delay in its announcement, however, suggested that the senator was the active force in the anti-White campaign.

Conservative fears were duly realised when White quickly showed a willingness to take the initiative on the ground, and over time, became the most influential individual in orchestrating U.S. policy.⁴⁶² Crucially, the ambassador saw the Salvadoran right as the primary threat facing the country. He openly criticised its part in the violence, such as in the

⁴⁵⁸ "[Congressional Questions regarding El Salvador]," Letter, 14 February, 1980, *DNSA*.

⁴⁵⁹ Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit*, 183.

⁴⁶⁰ Gordon Humphrey (NH), "Nomination of Robert E. White To Be Ambassador To El Salvador," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 4740.

⁴⁶¹ "State Dept. Spreading Marxism in Central America," *Human Events*, 12 April, 1990, 1.

⁴⁶² Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit*, 183.

aftermath of Archbishop Óscar Romero's assassination in late March. As violent clashes erupted in the capital, White blamed the right for intensifying the conflict. He pointed to embassy reports linking anti-Castro Cubans from the Omega-7 terrorist group, hired by the Salvadoran right, to a series of explosions throughout the country. The ambassador also spoke of a right-wing plot behind Romero's murder, which, alongside similar allegations from Catholic Church and U.S. officials, fuelled suspicion about those instigating the most extreme violence across the country.⁴⁶³ White also headed off a right-wing coup by threatening the military aid package if conservatives in the country went through with their plan.⁴⁶⁴

Conservatives, Helms especially, had dutifully maintained that violence in the country, and across the region as a whole, was a product of external leftist provocation. Now, however, the most senior American official in El Salvador was openly condemning the right and taking a direct and immediate role on the ground. Helms was so concerned that he devoted a Senate speech on 27 March to "The Poor Judgment Of U.S. Ambassador Robert White". White's comments, said Helms, were 'a propaganda bonanza for the Communists and other far-left elements in El Salvador', and a justification for the leftist insurgency.⁴⁶⁵ Unnecessary public speculation, 'and that is all it is, public speculation,' did nothing to help U.S. policy. It merely added to the 'explosive atmosphere' in the country. Recognising that White's comments had gained widespread coverage in El Salvador, Helms described his own inter-agency meetings in which no definitive evidence had been provided as to the presence of either

⁴⁶³ "5 killed in aftermath of archbishop's slaying," *Chicago Tribune*, 26 March, 1980, 2, "Salvador Is Rocked By 30 Bomb Blasts," *The New York Times*, 26 March, 1980, A1, and Christopher Dickey, "Salvadorans Pay Tearful Homage to Slain Archbishop," 26 March, 1980, A21.

⁴⁶⁴ Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit*, 186-187.

⁴⁶⁵ Jesse Helms (NC), "The Poor Judgment Of U.S. Ambassador Robert White," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 6957.

anti-Castro Cubans or the identity of Romero's assassin.⁴⁶⁶ Protestations of the innocence of the Salvadoran right were to become a familiar refrain in the years ahead.

Nor did Helms mention that Omega-7 was closely linked to the Argentine counter-insurgency programme that the senator had previously suggested as a viable mechanism for the 'elimination of the Marxist insurgency' in El Salvador.⁴⁶⁷ It had been the Argentine military, looking to expand its internal dirty war, which forged what Ariel Armony describes as a 'formidable transnational political nexus' of right-wing forces across the hemisphere. Omega-7 was one such group, incorporated as Argentina looked for allies elsewhere in Latin America. Conservative groups in the U.S. such as the Moral Majority, with which Helms was closely associated, were also part of this network.⁴⁶⁸ White's comments threatened to shine a spotlight on the senator's anti-communist allies.

Helms' fears about White were fuelled still further by exaggerated reports he received from conservative Salvadoran allies, who told him that White was encouraging leftist members of the junta to join 'other representatives of the far left' in mounting a coup. Helms wrote directly to White to request a formal response to the charges.⁴⁶⁹ In effect, he accused the ambassador of plotting a coup.

⁴⁶⁶ Helms, "The Poor Judgment Of U.S. Ambassador Robert White," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 6956-6957.

⁴⁶⁷ "[Congressional Questions regarding El Salvador]," Letter, 14 February, 1980, *DNSA*.

⁴⁶⁸ Ariel C. Armony, "Transnationalizing the Dirty War," in *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War*, eds. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 137.

⁴⁶⁹ "Request from Senator Jesse Helms Re Leftist Coup Plotting", Limited Official Use, Cable, 09436, 15 July, 1980, *DNSA*.

The letter also contained, as the ambassador recognised, a subtler trap. In referring to left-wing members of the junta and 'other representatives of the far left', Helms conflated the two, looking to press the State Department to go on record as accepting the presence of the far left on the junta. White found the suggestion 'tendentious', and the entire query 'disingenuous.' The ambassador understood the complexity of responding to Helms, and his response indicated that the embassy was becoming accustomed to dealing with Helms. 'Unless the Department is careful in drafting its reply', he informed his superiors in Washington, 'we could wind up admitting that some members of the present junta are adherents of the far left, a total falsehood.'⁴⁷⁰

A significant part of Helms' animosity toward White, as has been noted, was the ambassador's well-known commitment to socio-economic reform in El Salvador. The senator continued to lead those congressional forces seeking the termination of such initiatives when, in June 1980, he tried to amend the year's International Security and Development Cooperation Act to prohibit U.S. funds being used for the nationalisation of farms and banks in El Salvador. There was no problem with land reform if it was achieved through democratic processes, Helms announced (rather disingenuously), but he would not countenance the American taxpayer contributing to what he dismissed as 'not land reform, but people reform.'⁴⁷¹

The amendment was accepted, though it does not appear that Helms was attempting to construct a permanent record of colleagues' votes in this case, despite his claims that the amendment was:

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Jesse Helms (NC), "International Security And Development Corporation Act Of 1980," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 15077-15085.

intended to put the Senate on record as to whether or not we believe in the American economic system... or whether we believe that the less developed countries of the world will be better off if they adopt Marxist or Marxist-Leninist economic and political systems.⁴⁷²

He asked to vitiate the yeas and nays, thus bypassing a recorded vote. Nor was his amendment likely to influence policy. The Carter administration placed little emphasis on the nationalisation component of reform in El Salvador.⁴⁷³ Helms' tactics in this case, therefore, appear to be an effort to clarify and promote his conservative vision for the country, and to frame the policy debate on his terms.

As has been the case in Panama and Nicaragua, Helms found constructing a foreign policy vision for El Salvador relatively simple during the Carter administration. Unconstrained by the necessity to suggest practical solutions for the country's mounting instability, the senator was able to articulate an aggressive anti-communist and fiercely pro-free-market framework. This appealed to conservatives who had yet to face the challenges of reconciling a country divided by precisely this kind of Manichean Cold War ideology. Over the next eight years, Helms and movement conservatives would continue to insist on this approach, even as Ronald Reagan found, like Carter before him, that principle was hard to maintain on the battlefields of El Salvador's civil war.

Helms and Reagan the Pragmatist, 1981-1988

Signals in the transition period, and the opening days of the Reagan administration, offered movement conservatives hope for a shift in

⁴⁷² Helms, "International Security And Development Corporation Act Of 1980," *Cong. Rec.* 126 (1980), 15075.

⁴⁷³ Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit*, 188.

priorities in El Salvador. Suspect State Department officials were quickly removed and the new Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, outlined an aggressive strategy to defeat the FMLN swiftly and decisively. This was formalised on 23 January, 1981, when the National Security Council unanimously agreed to increase military and economic aid and prioritise the defeat of the FMLN.⁴⁷⁴ It was a duplication, in official form, of Helms' policy statement for El Salvador almost one year before.

By mid-1981, however, the administration was moderating its bellicose rhetoric in the face of congressional and public concern. A critical turning point was a 16 July speech by the assistant secretary for Latin American affairs, Tom Enders, in which he emphasised the need for a political solution to the Salvadoran crisis. Flatly contradicting the movement conservative theory on the background of the war, Enders announced, "just as the conflict was Salvadoran in its origins, so its ultimate resolution must be Salvadoran." Elections, not military force, he said, would save El Salvador.⁴⁷⁵ The plan had the support of White House moderates like Chief of Staff James Baker, who regarded Central America policy as a potential threat to the president's domestic agenda.⁴⁷⁶ Crucially, however, there was also support from some hard-liners, notably Al Haig. The Secretary of State, who asked Enders to make the speech, told Reagan that a political initiative would shore up congressional support for aid to El Salvador and educate the public over administration policy.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁴ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 82.

⁴⁷⁵ "Excerpts from El Salvador Speech," *The New York Times*, 17 July, 1981, A6.

⁴⁷⁶ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 127.

⁴⁷⁷ Memorandum, Alexander M. Haig, Jr. to President Reagan, "Policy Statement on El Salvador," 6 July, 1981, folder "El Salvador (6/1/81 - 12/31/81) (5)," Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File, Latin America Box 30, RRL.

Enders' speech received substantial attention, making the front pages of several national newspapers that were highly critical of Reagan's El Salvador policy. *The New York Times* dubbed the administration's apparent new strategy 'A Forward Retreat'.⁴⁷⁸ Congress was reassured by both the tone and substance of the remarks, though it did not entirely dispel the concern generated by months of aggressive rhetoric from Reagan and his aides.⁴⁷⁹ As such, at the end of the year, Congress introduced a certification clause into the annual foreign aid bill, which required the president to sign off on progress made by El Salvador's government on human rights issues, free elections, and negotiations to end the war, as well as the continued implementation of economic reforms. Democrats and Republicans alike supported the measure, while the administration believed it could live with the legislation as an easy-to-pay price for continued military assistance. After all, certification only required periodic avowals of progress, and such progress was entirely at the judgement of the administration.

To Helms, the new strategy was disastrous. The senator singled out Enders as the responsible party, and declared that the administration's land reform provisions served 'only one goal: pragmatism.'⁴⁸⁰ It was a bold and unvarnished repudiation of the administration's policies, and a warning sign to the White House that the senator would not be satisfied simply by increased military assistance for El Salvador. Just as important was a Salvadoran society predicated around the core principles of conservatism, which meant rejecting economic reforms that struck at the existing distribution of private property.

⁴⁷⁸ "A Forward Retreat on El Salvador," *The New York Times*, 20 July, 1981, A16, and John M. Goshko, "U.S. Calls for Elections in El Salvador," *Washington Post*, 17 July, 1981, A1.

⁴⁷⁹ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 130, and Arnson, *Crossroads*, 73.

⁴⁸⁰ Jesse Helms (NC), "International Security And Development Cooperation Act Of 1981," *Cong. Rec.* 127 (1981), 25079.

In such a way, Helms emerged as one of the foremost opponents of an important part of the Reagan administration's El Salvador strategy. Helms sought to prohibit U.S. funding for land reform 'in any way, shape, or form' on the basis that intervention in the economic sphere was contrary to Reagan's own political ideals. Unwilling to accept the pragmatic reasoning that lay behind the administration's reluctant commitment to land reform, and disregarding Reagan's public support for the programme, the senator depicted himself acting as a shield for the president. 'My amendment', he told colleagues, 'is in harmony with the principles enunciated by President Reagan and responsible economists worldwide and in the major policy speeches of the President and the Secretary of State.'⁴⁸¹ He could not claim that he had the support of Ronald Reagan, but he could portray his entrepreneurship as an act of loyal protection.

Otto Reich, who served as assistant administrator for the Agency for International Development between 1981 and 1983, recalled that the division between Helms and the administration over land reform infuriated the senator's camp. 'We used to drive them crazy', Reich remembered, because Helms' office was 'philosophically totally opposed to some of the things that the Reagan Administration was doing.' Reich concluded, in hindsight, that the administration failed adequately to respond to Helms' concerns.⁴⁸² This administration inability to sell policy not only to the American public but to conservatives – their supposedly strongest supporters – may have played a role in Helms' calls for clarity in the United States' approach to El Salvador. Support for land reform not only tempered conservatism, in the senator's eyes, but it confused allies and demonstrated a lack of resolve. 'It is time that we stopped sending ambiguous and confusing signals to the international community', Helms told the Senate:

⁴⁸¹ Helms, "International Security And Development Cooperation Act Of 1981," *Cong. Rec.* 127 (1981), 25083.

⁴⁸² Otto Reich, interview with Charles Stuart Kennedy, 30 August, 1991, *ADST*.

Throughout Latin America, throughout the world, the world should know where we stand, Mr. President. Do we stand for growth or stagnation? State control or individual initiative? Freedom or socialism? A strong, vibrant economy or a collapse which can only aid the guerrillas? Mr. President, I believe the choice is clear.⁴⁸³

Helms always maintained that the foundation of democracy lay in the free market. The ability to participate in the democratic process was a secondary right, inferior to that of owning private property.⁴⁸⁴ As he told colleagues in March 1981, reading from a letter sent to him by a Salvadoran businessman with whom he was acquainted:

The real help that we need from our foreign friends is in restoring in this country [El Salvador] the laws that protect the free enterprise system. That will be the beginning of a future of democracy, progress, and justice for all our people, and a stable, friendly country to the United States of America.⁴⁸⁵

Only by ceasing the restrictive and destructive economic reforms being imposed on El Salvador by his government could the transition toward democracy begin. Yet the senator's efforts to restrict the progress of economic reforms in El Salvador were considered by the embassy in El Salvador as an impediment to this change, and officials warned Washington

⁴⁸³ Helms, "International Security And Development Cooperation Act Of 1981," *Cong. Rec.* 127 (1981), 25083.

⁴⁸⁴ Helms, "A New Policy," 20.

⁴⁸⁵ Jesse Helms (NC), "U.S. Policy Regarding El Salvador – What Should It Be? How Should We Approach It?" *Cong. Rec.* 127 (1981), 3900.

that Helms strategy for restricting spending on compensation for expropriated lands could undermine the whole programme of reform.⁴⁸⁶

By 1982, the Reagan administration had committed itself to a political solution in El Salvador. Officials in Washington joined with their Salvadoran colleagues in promoting elections for a new legislative assembly in 1982 and a civilian president in 1984. The White House hoped these elections would foster a working democracy and maintain moderate economic reform. This would in turn mollify congressional critics who held the key to funding the administration's top priority: military assistance to El Salvador's beleaguered armed forces.⁴⁸⁷

The Reagan administration saw José Napoleón Duarte and his Christian Democrat Party (PDC) as the most promising allies for this strategy. Duarte was a long-standing member of the Salvadoran political elite, having helped found the PDC in 1960 before serving as mayor of San Salvador between 1964 and 1970. Though he had been somewhat tarnished by his participation in the juntas of the early 1980s, during which time human rights abuses intensified dramatically, he nevertheless enjoyed a reputation as a pragmatic, conscientious moderate. He had good relations with Congress and the White House, and the support of the United States embassy in San Salvador. Even Helms called him 'an exceedingly impressive man', and argued he ought to be given 'a fair shot at getting his country straightened out.'⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁶ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to American Embassy Paris and Secretary of State, 11 June, 1982, folder "El Salvador (1/1/82 - 12/31/82) (1)," Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File, Latin America Box 30, *RRL*.

⁴⁸⁷ Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, 24-26, Arnson, *Crossroads*, 72, and LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 126-127.

⁴⁸⁸ Helms, "International Security And Development Cooperation Act Of 1981," *Cong. Rec.* 127 (1981), 21643.

While it remained supportive of Duarte and the Christian Democrats, the White House was not averse to organised political involvement by Salvadoran conservatives. Officials in Washington believed that democratic reform could modernise El Salvador's oligarchy by introducing its members to openly contested politics. An effective, even pragmatic, Salvadoran political right might gain some measure of power – thus possibly limiting the pace of reform – but it would be incontrovertible evidence of democracy at work. This multi-ideological Salvadoran democracy, backed by moderate reforms and a supportive military, would then help sustain congressional support as the administration worked on defeating the FMLN on the battlefield.⁴⁸⁹

To the Reagan administration's consternation, however, Robert D'Aubuisson and his National Republican Alliance (ARENA) party emerged as the Salvadoran right's political front. The former army major was a near legendary figure on the extreme right. A protégé of General José Alberto Medrano, whose intelligence and paramilitary organisations had formed the basis of the brutal Salvadoran security state, D'Aubuisson rose through the military ranks as a counterrevolutionary intelligence operative. He was highly influential in the organisation of right-wing death squads and paramilitary co-ordinating organisations, both before and after his forced retirement in the wake of the October 1979 coup. His involvement in the assassination of Archbishop Romero, among his other activities, led Robert White to label the major "a pathological killer."⁴⁹⁰

The Reagan administration reacted to D'Aubuisson's newfound political career by denying him permission to visit the United States and

⁴⁸⁹ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 129-130.

⁴⁹⁰ Overviews of D'Aubuisson's career can be found in Stanley's *Protection Racket State* and Bonner's *Weakness and Deceit*.

declaring him “undesirable”.⁴⁹¹ Yet neither D’Aubuisson’s reputation nor inflammatory rhetoric worried Helms. The senator and his staff saw a kindred conservative spirit in D’Aubuisson, someone Helms believed ‘openly espoused the principles of the Republican Party in the United States’ and promoted ‘the same values and principles as held by mainstream Americans’.⁴⁹² Helms became D’Aubuisson’s patron in the United States. For more than a decade, no American was a more open advocate for the major. Despite his spurious claim that ‘I hold no particular brief for any politicians in El Salvador’, the senator worked tirelessly to legitimise D’Aubuisson and his party as a serious and supportable electoral force.⁴⁹³

Even before D’Aubuisson’s emergence as a political contender, Helms and his staff moved within the same transnational anti-communist network as the major. The Confederación Anticomunista Latinoamericana (CAL), for example, whose meetings both Helms’ staff and D’Aubuisson attended in the early 1980s, facilitated their association and the sharing of information and ideas.⁴⁹⁴ Both possessed an intense anti-communism that shaped their understanding of the western hemisphere’s social, economic, and political turmoil, and CAL provided a natural forum in which to cement their connection. D’Aubuisson’s objective was to oust the Sandinistas and remove Castro from power. Both fitted neatly with Helms’ goals for the region.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹¹ Christopher Dickey, “Salvadoran Rightist Mounts Vigorous Election Campaign,” *Washington Post*, 7 February, 1982, A1.

⁴⁹² Jesse Helms (NC), “The Election Results In El Salvador,” *Cong. Rec.* 130 (1984), 11249, and Jesse Helms (NC), “Inauguration Day In El Salvador,” *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 10510.

⁴⁹³ Helms, “Inauguration Day In El Salvador,” *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 10508.

⁴⁹⁴ Armony, “Transnationalizing the Dirty War,” 145.

⁴⁹⁵ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, folder “El Salvador (1/1/82 – 12/31/82),” Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File, Latin America Box 30, *RRL*.

In this period, according to an *Albuquerque Journal* article by Craig Pyes, two of Helms' principal assistants – Chris Manion and Deborah DeMoss – forged close contacts with the major and his wealthy Salvadoran backers exiled in Miami.⁴⁹⁶ The importance of such connections for Helms' independent information entrepreneurship quickly became clear, as it was information supplied by D'Aubuisson and his supporters, visiting Washington in July 1980, that led Helms to accuse Robert White over the alleged leftist coup plot at that time.⁴⁹⁷ The reciprocal benefit of this transnational anti-communist network for D'Aubuisson and ARENA was manifested in the origins of his party. Mario Sandoval Alarcón, a prominent Guatemalan politician, death squad leader, and member of CAL, advised D'Aubuisson to form a political party to legitimise the far right's goals in El Salvador.⁴⁹⁸ Helms' office, Pyes alleged, was also involved. Chris Manion urged D'Aubuisson to create a political front, and, using material from the 1980 Republican Party platform (which, as previously discussed, had been partly crafted by Helms and his staff), Manion helped ARENA draft its own guiding principles and policy proposals. Though Helms and his staff denied Pyes' claims, DeMoss conceded, “we do know these people.” As Link points out, there is strong circumstantial evidence to support the conclusion that Helms' office was closely connected with the origins of ARENA.⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁶ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 247.

⁴⁹⁷ “Request from Senator Jesse Helms Re Leftist Coup Plotting”, Limited Official Use, Cable, 09436, July 15, 1980, DNSA, and Karen DeYoung, “Salvadoran Rightist Eludes Ban Against Entering U.S.,” *Washington Post*, 2 July, 1980, A1.

⁴⁹⁸ Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit*, 307-308, and Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, 232.

⁴⁹⁹ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 247. For further discussion on the role of Helms, and U.S. conservatives, in the formation of ARENA, see Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 157.

D'Aubuisson's entrance into the legitimate political sphere prompted fears about renewed political instability and violence in El Salvador. The major's rhetoric was so inflammatory – at one point he suggested an ARENA government would place Christian Democrats on trial for treason – that the head of the country's election committee suggested that rebel sympathisers might actually want a D'Aubuisson victory.⁵⁰⁰ D'Aubuisson's backlash politics, Dr. Jorge Bustamante argued, would swell the ranks of the insurgency and increase its strength.⁵⁰¹ Such fears not only prompted the Reagan administration to distance itself from D'Aubuisson and his party, but to actively support the PDC in the upcoming legislative assembly elections.

ARENA's rapid growth in popularity, partly a consequence of D'Aubuisson's considerable charm and campaign energy, surprised American officials. The administration feared their reform programme would be gutted by a far-right government brought into power by the Reagan administration's own commitment to democracy.⁵⁰² When ARENA joined several other conservative political allies to create a majority capable of placing D'Aubuisson in the presidency, the United States intervened. It told the armed forces that military aid would be cut off should D'Aubuisson be chosen, and provided nine alternative candidates to choose from. Sufficiently worried by the danger to their war effort, the officer corps forced the country's political class to choose from those on the

⁵⁰⁰ "Conversation with ARENA Party Leaders," [Vaughn Index Attached], Confidential, Cable San Salvador, 27 March, 1982, DNSA.

⁵⁰¹ Warren Hoge, "Candidate Favoring Napalm Use Gains In Salvador," *The New York Times*, 19 February, 1982, A10.

⁵⁰² "U.S. Indicating Support for Salvadoran Centrists," *The New York Times*, 19 March, 1982, 11, "Continue reforms, Salvador told," *Chicago Tribune*, 18 March, 1982, a5, and Warren Hoge, "U.S. Envoy Sees Peril to Aid If Salvadoran Extremists Win," *Washington Post*, 17 March, 1982, A10.

list. Alvaro Magaña, a political neutral with close connections to the military, was duly appointed president.⁵⁰³

On 22 April, just two days after the Reagan administration had dispatched General Vernon Walters to deliver the president's ultimatum, Helms told the Senate he had received reports that the Salvadoran military was exercising undue influence on the outcome of the election. Like in Nicaragua, where Helms embraced democracy as a means of pressuring the Sandinistas and furthering anti-communist goals, the senator trumpeted the nascent Salvadoran democracy so that he might protect early indications of conservative electoral gains. Helms therefore asked if events did not show a 'breach of the neutrality of the Salvadoran military with regard to politics, a neutrality which many in this Chamber have encouraging during the past months.' His reproach to the army, a bastion of the established order that he had previously defended, was sharp:

I think the Salvadoran army should understand that many in this country would consider such a blatant manipulation to be tantamount to a military coup, and a tragic breakdown of the fragile democratic process which so many here have supported during the past few months. Let the word go out to El Salvador that we encourage the democratic assembly and the development of truly representative government, and that this Senator would deplore the intimidation of that process, either from this country or from the Salvadoran armed forces.⁵⁰⁴

Despite the senator's public unease, and although the administration was distancing itself from D'Aubuisson and his allies, the close cooperation

⁵⁰³ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 160-165, and Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, 232.

⁵⁰⁴ Jesse Helms (NC), "Double Standards In The Democratic Process?" *Cong. Rec.* 128 (1982), 7526.

between Helms and the far right in El Salvador necessitated an uneasy truce between the White House and his office. Helms was disingenuous about the manner in which he had received reports of the military's influence on the elections. His aide John Carbaugh had been part of the U.S. delegation to El Salvador during the crisis, and was specifically tasked with making clear to the military that the cut-off in assistance was a real possibility and not a ruse by the State Department.⁵⁰⁵ Carbaugh's involvement followed Ambassador Hinton's suggestion that 'perhaps the best way to have some impact on the economic powers who have supported ARENA [sic]... during the election campaign and who probably are still manoeuvring, is through Senator Helms.' In an indication of Helms' political allies within the administration, Hinton argued National Security Advisor William Clark would be the best person to approach the senator about the matter.⁵⁰⁶ This was to be a recurring aspect of El Salvador policy. At a handful of critical moments the Reagan administration turned to Helms and his staff to exert meaningful leverage on the Salvadoran right.

The Reagan administration's manipulation of the electoral process angered Helms' allies in El Salvador. Just as the senator had condemned the United States, and especially the State Department, for its interference in the country, so too did D'Aubuisson tap into this narrative as the 1984 presidential elections neared. A fervent nationalist, D'Aubuisson consistently criticised the embassy as a manipulative influence.⁵⁰⁷ The State Department wanted "a government of puppets operated by Carter-like manipulators", he told campaign audiences, and blamed diplomats for

⁵⁰⁵ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 164.

⁵⁰⁶ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "(C The Powers Behind The Politicians," 15 April, 1982, folder "El Salvador (1/1/82 - 12/31/82) (1)," Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File, Latin America Box 30, *RRL*.

⁵⁰⁷ Lydia Chavez, "Fish and Watermelon on the Salvadoran Hustings," *The New York Times*, 27 December, 1983, A2.

placing the families of military officers at risk through their constant human rights talk.⁵⁰⁸

Unlike Helms, however, D'Aubuisson was able to stomach displays of pragmatism – at least in private – so as to keep himself in the game. Understanding the importance of the reform programme to the White House, D'Aubuisson tempered his rhetoric when confronted by U.S. officials. Land reform, he promised cautious embassy personnel, would be adapted rather than jettisoned.⁵⁰⁹ It was a surprising sentiment, and undoubtedly can be treated with a great degree of scepticism, but D'Aubuisson was at the very least able to appear tolerant of political reality.

The presidential election itself was the next milestone for the Reagan administration. Officials hoped a peaceful election of a congressionally acceptable candidate with a clear popular mandate would placate any remaining critics by demonstrating even more substantial progress toward civilian government. Such a result, White House officials believed, would persuade those legislators still reticent about military assistance to support Reagan's attempts to bolster El Salvador's armed forces.⁵¹⁰ Although the 26 March round of voting failed to produce a decisive victory for any of the candidates, the administration's strategy appeared to be validated when the U.S. observer team publicly praised participation levels and Democrats who had witnessed the election spoke openly of reconsidering their previous opposition to Reagan's military aid programme.⁵¹¹

⁵⁰⁸ "D'Aubuisson Warns Followers of Conspiracy Against his Candidacy," Confidential, Cable San Salvador, January 27, 1984, *DNSA*, and Lydia Chavez, "Salvador Rightist to Run for Presidency," *The New York Times*, 19 December, 1983, A3.

⁵⁰⁹ "Ambassador's March 8th Conversation with Major D'Aubuisson," Secret, Cable, March 13, 1984, *DNSA*.

⁵¹⁰ Lydia Chavez, "Moderate Leading By Early Counts In Salvador Vote," *The New York Times*, 27 March, 1984, A1.

⁵¹¹ Robert J. McCartney, "Politicians, U.S. Officials Defend Results of Salvadoran Election," *Washington Post*, 27 March, 1984, A12, George De

The lack of a clear result in the March vote necessitated a run-off between Duarte and D'Aubuisson, scheduled for 6 May. The White House and State Department continued to oppose D'Aubuisson, fearing a massive surge in violence should he win the presidency. The administration's decision to deny D'Aubuisson a visa for a pre-election visit to the United States was a clear indication of its distaste for his candidacy.⁵¹² Administration figures also encouraged speculation that military assistance packages would be impossible to pass should D'Aubuisson win. According to one official, this was the "nightmare" scenario, though such talk infuriated conservatives outside of the White House who continued to believe D'Aubuisson was the man to successfully prosecute the war against the FMLN.⁵¹³

Duarte did not enjoy the administration's complete confidence. Officials had identified more appealing candidates during the general election, including Fidel Chávez Mena of the PDC and Francisco Guerrero of the PCN, because of Duarte's propensity to anger both the Salvadoran military and the country's private sector. Yet with D'Aubuisson evoking such strong resistance, the administration was willing to overlook Duarte's perceived political and ideological flaws. "Everyone in the [U.S.] Embassy knew that if Duarte didn't win, that was the end of Reagan's policy in El Salvador", one State Department official noted.⁵¹⁴ As such, and in

Lama, "El Salvador runoff likely," *Chicago Tribune*, 27 March, 1984, 1, and Hedrick Smith, "Better Prospects Seen for Raising Aid to Salvador," *The New York Times*, 27 March, 1984, A1.

⁵¹² Lydia Chavez, "U.S. Role in Salvador," *The New York Times*, 5 May, 1984, 6.

⁵¹³ "Will Duarte Victory Mean Setback for El Salvador?" *Human Events*, 7 April, 1984, 5-6, and Hedrick Smith, "No Sure Bets," *The New York Times*, 1 April, 1984, E1.

⁵¹⁴ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 158. For a broader overview of American preferences among the candidates, see LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 246-249.

accordance with a March 1982 presidential finding, the CIA implemented a programme of covert aid for Duarte and the PDC, aimed at securing their victory.⁵¹⁵

The administration claimed that it was following a policy of scrupulous neutrality.⁵¹⁶ This façade, however, was challenged when Helms wrote to the president on 1 May to accuse Ambassador Pickering of overseeing a campaign of indirect support for Duarte. It was an ‘open secret’, Helms said, that the ambassador had met with various candidates in order to influence the election. Furthermore, according to the senator, Pickering had forced President Magaña to veto the Constituent Assembly’s effort to jettison an AID-backed computerised voting system designed to prevent ballot fraud. Pickering’s actions made him ‘the leader of the death squad against democracy’, Helms said, and the senator demanded he be recalled.⁵¹⁷

Helms’ accusations, which he repeated publicly the following day in a more sweeping critique of U.S. policy in El Salvador, were an unwelcome distraction for an administration in need of a trouble-free election.⁵¹⁸ The Republican leadership was exasperated by Helms’ decision to raise his concerns in such a public manner. Howard Baker told journalists “‘Jesse does what Jesse feels he must do’”, while Charles Percy (R-IL), a party colleague and chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, declared, “‘That’s

⁵¹⁵ Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987* (London: Simon & Schuster Limited, 1987), 117, and Robert J. McCartney, “U.S. Seen Assisting Duarte In Sunday’s Salvadoran Vote,” *Washington Post*, 4 May, 1984, A1.

⁵¹⁶ “Wrap-Up of Salvadoran First-Round Elections,” Confidential, Cable State, Excised Copy, 101935, 7 April, 1984, DNSA.

⁵¹⁷ Letter, Senator Jesse Helms to President Reagan, 1 May, 1984, folder “El Salvador [04/23/1984 – 05/08/1984] Box 90378,” Box 1, Constantine Menges Files, RRL.

⁵¹⁸ Jesse Helms (NC), “The El Salvador Elections,” *Cong. Rec.* 130 (1984), 10688-10695.

not my style, that's not the way I would do it.”⁵¹⁹ In the White House too, there was dismay. Aides circulated a draft reply to the senator's letter that criticised him for his unwillingness to toe the administration line, saying, 'It is important to U.S. national interests that we pull together on this important issue.'⁵²⁰ It is not clear if the letter was ever sent, however, and a revised draft no longer contained this language – nor even an affirmation of the administration's impartiality in the election.

As with his legislative forays, Helms' accusations forced his targets into placing their position on record. In this case, however, the senator had set a trap for Reagan, not the liberals and moderates he normally battled. The charges were too provocative to ignore, and the administration was forced into a misleading confirmation that it was “taking no sides” in the election.⁵²¹ To do otherwise would have been to acknowledge openly that it had been tainting the very democracy it sought to construct. This may well explain why a second draft of the president's reply to Helms made no mention of neutrality, but simply declared Reagan had 'the utmost confidence' in Pickering and said he had done 'a superb job in promoting democracy and safeguarding U.S. interests in El Salvador.'⁵²²

Helms thus placed the administration in a catch-22 situation, and succeeded in drawing out a clear falsehood from the White House. That Helms chose to write to Reagan while the president was returning from China also created some confusion within the administration over whether

⁵¹⁹ Steven V. Roberts, “Reagan Defends Aide In Salvador Assailed By Helms,” *The New York Times*, 4 May, 1984, A1.

⁵²⁰ Draft Letter, President Reagan to Senator Jesse Helms, 10 May, 1984, folder “El Salvador [05/09/1984 – 05/18/1984] Box 90378,” Box 1, Constantine Menges Files, *RRL*.

⁵²¹ Roberts, “Reagan Defends Aide,” A1.

⁵²² Draft Letter, President Reagan to Senator Jesse Helms, 10 May, 1984, folder “El Salvador [05/09/1984 – 05/18/1984] Box 90378,” Box 1, Constantine Menges Files, *RRL*.

the president had even seen the letter, and delayed a definitive response from the White House that only served to prolong the impact of the senator's initial claims.⁵²³

Helms substantially transformed the lens through which the election was viewed, both in the United States and El Salvador. In place of the administration's positive framework of democracy in action, the debate shifted toward one over American interventionism and duplicity. The national press in the U.S. seized upon Helms' accusations, and coverage of the election repeatedly invoked his charges of CIA and State Department impropriety.⁵²⁴ Even after the run-off, as votes were being tallied, the senator's actions continued to have repercussions at the highest levels of government. Reagan was forced into a quiet retreat from his previously outspoken support for the electoral process. He barely acknowledged the Salvadoran election in his much anticipated national speech on Central America on 9 May.⁵²⁵ "That indicates they [the administration] felt they got hit hard by Helms", one anonymous senator explained, "and he's damaged them down there."⁵²⁶

⁵²³ "State Dept. Has No Comment," *The New York Times*, 3 May, 1984, A12.

⁵²⁴ For examples of the media coverage afforded to Helms' charges, see George de Lama, "Right wing blasts U.S. on Salvador," *Chicago Tribune*, 4 May, 1984, 1, Steven V. Roberts, "Reagan Defends Aide In Salvador Assailed By Helms," *The New York Times*, 4 May, 1984, A1, Lydia Chavez, "Helms Bids Envoy To Salvador Quit," *The New York Times*, 3 May, 1984, A1, and Robert J. McCartney, "Helms Said to Demand Envoy Pickering's Ouster," *Washington Post*, 3 May, 1984, A34.

⁵²⁵ "Address to the Nation on United States Policy in Central America, 9 May, 1984," *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, accessed 12 February, 2014, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/50984h.htm>.

⁵²⁶ "Allegations of Covert U.S. Assistance to Duarte," [Press Guidance on Senator Helms Charges of CIA Funding of Jose Napoleon Duarte's Campaign], Unclassified, Cable State, 10 May, 1984, *DNSA*, and Joanne Omang, "Hill Panel Says Helms' Charges Are 'Overstated'," *Washington Post*, 10 May, 1984, A23.

In El Salvador also, Helms' charges became integral to the election. ARENA officials openly cited his letter to support their complaints about U.S.-backed electoral fraud.⁵²⁷ D'Aubuisson's campaign talk of State Department interference in El Salvador's sovereign affairs appeared to be vindicated and, confident that the right's fears were justified, D'Aubuisson used Helms' letter to demand a special Legislative Assembly investigation into American interference in the run-off.⁵²⁸ He was also able to use the letter as leverage to gain a meeting with the U.S. embassy's political officer on 3 May, though there was little he and his political allies could do during the discussion except privately state their shock and dismay at U.S. actions.⁵²⁹

That D'Aubuisson and his party could quickly introduce Helms' charges to a Salvadoran audience was due to the close association between the senator's office and ARENA. Helms' staff phoned ARENA with the text of the letter, and the Salvadoran party was able to publicise the accusations over radio on the same day the senator made his floor speech demanding Pickering's removal.⁵³⁰ In an indication of the comparative effectiveness of Helms' transnational network in rapidly sharing information, while ARENA received the text of Helms' letter on 2 May, the U.S. embassy had to wait until 4 May before receiving a transcript.⁵³¹ This caused sufficient

⁵²⁷ Robert J. McCartney, "U.S. Seen Assisting Duarte In Sunday's Salvadoran Election," *The New York Times*, 4 May, 1984, A1.

⁵²⁸ "ARENA Asks Assembly to Investigate Ambassador's "Interference" in Salvadoran Elections," Limited Official Use, Cable San Salvador, May 5, 1984, *DNSA*.

⁵²⁹ "Helms Letter and ARENA: Additional D'Aubuisson Charge; Against Embassy," Confidential, Cable, Excised Copy, 4825, 3 May, 1984, *DNSA*.

⁵³⁰ Chavez, "Helms Bids Envoy," A1.

⁵³¹ "Helms Letter and Percy Statement," Limited Official Use, Cable State, 131080, 4 May, 1984, *DNSA*.

confusion that one embassy figure, upon hearing ARENA's accusations, initially questioned the authenticity of the letter.⁵³²

Two days after the run-off, Helms revealed further details of United States' operations on behalf of Duarte and the PDC. He expanded on his criticism of the CIA's covert programme, declaring that the agency, along with the State Department, had 'bought the election'.⁵³³ The senator's exposing of a covert programme could have left him open to charges of rank hypocrisy. Only a month earlier, in discussing the CIA's harbour mining operations in Nicaragua, Helms told colleagues that in general 'it does not advance the U.S. national interest at any time to talk about specific covert actions, even if they are successful.' The president, he said, 'has the constitutional authority to conduct our foreign policy' and covert actions were 'a classic tool of foreign policy.' Reagan was elected 'to use his judgment in the employment of that tool.'⁵³⁴

At the root of this apparent inconsistency lay one of the critical themes of Helms' foreign policy entrepreneurship: his perception that Reagan's El Salvador policy, like much of the president's foreign policy in general, was being subverted by the insidious machinations of non-elected bureaucrats. 'This was not the policy of President Reagan', he argued.

I have known the President too long to believe that he would ever support a phony election or a crooked election. This was the policy of a small coterie of bureaucrats with their own

⁵³² Chavez, "Helms Bids Envoy," A1.

⁵³³ Helms, "The Election Results In El Salvador," *Cong. Rec.* 130 (1984), 11249-11250.

⁵³⁴ Helms, "Miscellaneous Tariff, Trade, And Customs Matters," *Cong. Rec.* 130 (1984), 8531.

agenda and their own policies – the permanent government pursuing its own aims in defiance of the President’s wishes.⁵³⁵

This articulated a general concern within movement conservatism that the president’s ‘real’ foreign policy agenda was being undermined from within. Such fears had surfaced barely a year into Reagan’s first term, but they remained persistent right through the period until the Salvadoran elections (and, indeed, until the final days of his second term).⁵³⁶ Helms’ outburst against the ‘permanent government’ represented a particularly public example of this resentment, and illustrated the senator’s self-appointed guardianship of what conservatives perceived to be true Reaganism.

Helms’ second, more detailed statement on U.S. involvement coincided with on-going confusion over the outcome of the run-off. With Duarte and D’Aubuisson both claiming victory, the situation remained highly charged.⁵³⁷ Despite the latter’s apparent willingness to present himself as loyal opposition, reports reached the embassy of an ARENA plot to delay the election result and then oust the expected Duarte government.⁵³⁸ Though there is no evidence that Helms or his staff were

⁵³⁵ Helms, “The Election Results In El Salvador,” *Cong. Rec.* 130 (1984), 11249.

⁵³⁶ For a selection of articles expressing conservative fears, see “Clark Departure Demoralizes Conservatives,” *Human Events*, 29 October, 1983, 1, “’80 Mandate Endangered By Yielding to Pragmatists,” *Human Events*, 15 January, 1983, 1, “State Department Still Pushes Taiwan Sell-Out,” *Human Events*, 7 August, 1982, 5, “For The Record,” *National Review*, 9 July, 1982, 803, M. Stanton Evans, “Reagan Government a Mystery to Conservatives,” *Human Events*, 26 June, 1982, 7, and “Conservative Leaders Find Administration Officials Undermining Reagan Mandate,” *Human Events*, 30 January, 1982, 17.

⁵³⁷ Lydia Chavez, “Rightist Claims Election Victory In El Salvador,” *The New York Times*, 10 May, 1984, A1, Edward Cody, “Duarte Says He Has Won Presidency,” *Washington Post*, 8 May, 1984, A1, and Robert J. McCartney, “Both Sides Claim Win In Salvador,” *The New York Times*, 7 May, 1984, A1.

⁵³⁸ “Coup Report,” Secret, Cable, Excised Copy, 05214, 10 May, 1984, *DNSA*.

aware of this development, the Salvadoran right's persistent use of the senator's accusations to justify their political agitation illustrated the continuing, destabilising reverberations of his actions.⁵³⁹

It was only after a direct warning to the Salvadoran military's high command by both Pickering and Paul Gorman, head of U.S. Southern Command, about damaging consequences for military assistance that the prospective coup was aborted.⁵⁴⁰ Even this warning did not entirely convince El Salvador's extreme right to change course. The following week, the U.S. received reports that ARENA members were planning Pickering's assassination. The threat, deemed 'credible and extremely serious' by the State Department, prompted the administration to once again dispatch Vernon Walters to El Salvador to meet with D'Aubuisson and demand any such plan be aborted immediately. D'Aubuisson, who expressed shock at the charges, promised Walters he would head off any plot.⁵⁴¹ No attempt on Pickering's life was made.

The assassination scare underscored the extent to which elements within the Reagan administration had lost patience with Helms. Anonymous officials publicly accused Helms of encouraging the far right's action through his statements on the Salvadoran election.⁵⁴² Stories of a

⁵³⁹ The senator's charges were repeated by ARENA and D'Aubuisson a number of times in the aftermath of the election. See Chavez, "Rightist Candidate Claims Victory," A1, "ARENA Reactions to Duarte Victory," Confidential, Cable San Salvador, 13 May, 1984, *DNSA*, and "Election Related Developments," [Heavily Excised], Confidential, Cable San Salvador, Excised Copy, 05485, 16 May, 1984, *DNSA*.

⁵⁴⁰ "Coup Report," Secret, Cable, 11 May, 1984, *DNSA*.

⁵⁴¹ "Security Threats in El Salvador," Secret, Memorandum, Excised Copy, 17 May, 1984, *DNSA*.

⁵⁴² John M. Goshko, "D'Aubuisson's Cooperation Seen As Vital to U.S. Salvador Policy," *Washington Post*, 26 June, 1984, A8, and James LeMoyné, "Salvador Right Reportedly Plotted To Assassinate U.S. Ambassador," *The New York Times*, 23 June, 1984, 1.

personal rebuke from Reagan were leaked to the press, and there were suggestions that the senator and his aides had undermined the United States' attempts to mediate by tipping off D'Aubuisson about Walters' impending visit.⁵⁴³ Helms and his staff insisted that the administration had asked for their help in contacting D'Aubuisson to head off the assassination, and that at no point had Reagan given Helms a dressing down.⁵⁴⁴

An accurate reconstruction of events is difficult to come by. Certainly Helms' office contacted D'Aubuisson on 17 May, prior to Walters' arrival in El Salvador. The Salvadoran noted as much when he spoke with the envoy during the following day's meeting.⁵⁴⁵ There is also a consensus that Helms and Reagan met to discuss El Salvador some days prior to this. Beyond this, understanding the exact sequence of events is hindered by the range of accounts offered by those with knowledge about the episode. DeMoss, who made the phone call to D'Aubuisson, would appear most credible, but her assertion that the State Department had already called the Salvadoran a few days earlier does not fit with a classified inter-agency memo that recommended Walters' visit only after it had received, and reviewed, the threat on 17 May.⁵⁴⁶

At the same time, as scholarship on the Reagan administration has often stated, rival factions within the White House repeatedly used anonymous press leaks to fashion narratives and analysis favourable to

⁵⁴³ Joanne Omang, "U.S. feared slaying of envoy here," *Washington Post*, 27 June, 1984, A18, and LeMoyne, "Salvador Right Reportedly Plotted," 1.

⁵⁴⁴ Omang, "U.S. Feared Slaying of Envoy Here," A18, Leslie H. Gelb, "D'Aubuisson's Role In Plot Uncertain," *The New York Times*, 24 June, 1984, 10, and Hedrick Smith, "U.S. Confirms a Rightist Plot in Salvador to Murder Envoy," *The New York Times*, 23 June, 1984, 4.

⁵⁴⁵ "General Walters' Talk with D'Aubuisson," Secret, Cable, 19 May, 1984, *DNSA*.

⁵⁴⁶ Omang, "U.S. Feared Slaying of Envoy Here," A18, and "Security Threats in El Salvador," Secret, Memorandum, 17 May, 1984, *DNSA*.

their position. How accurate their claims about Helms' motivations and actions were has to be viewed through this unhelpful framework. LeoGrande adds further complexity by arguing Helms was briefed by an NSC official about the threat because of concerns that the senator would be exposed as an ally of D'Aubuisson when news of the assassination plot broke. The White House, LeoGrande states, was concerned this would damage Helms' re-election campaign and potentially cost the administration a strong supporter.⁵⁴⁷ The senator was certainly briefed on the threat, and was the only member of Congress to be afforded this consideration.⁵⁴⁸ Yet further evidence of these electoral justifications to inform Helms is not revealed elsewhere. Previously, White House political operatives had sought to distance the president from Helms' domestic problems. If this account were accurate, it would likely represent the work of an individual Helms ally within the bureaucracy, rather than an orchestrated initiative by the administration.⁵⁴⁹

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the Pickering plot, some conclusions about its significance can be reached. Firstly, despite branding the allegations as “ridiculous” and “sleazy journalism”, Helms' rhetoric had undoubtedly contributed to the tensions that lay behind the threat.⁵⁵⁰ State Department personnel working elsewhere, who often had to contend with visits from the senator's staff, believed Helms and his aides 'gave heart' to hard-line conservatives in host countries.⁵⁵¹ In this case, given that D'Aubuisson and ARENA repeatedly invoked Helms' letter during their

⁵⁴⁷ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 250.

⁵⁴⁸ “Security Threats in El Salvador,” Secret, Cable, May 18, 1984, *DNSA*.

⁵⁴⁹ Memo, Lee Atwater, 15 June, 1983, folder “Jesse Helms Fundraiser D.C. 06/16/1983 (3), White House Office of Speechwriting, Research Office: Records, Box 101, *RRL*.

⁵⁵⁰ Gelb, “D'Aubuisson's Role In Plot Uncertain,” 10 and Smith, “U.S. Confirms a Rightist Plot,” 4.

⁵⁵¹ Alexander F. Watson, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 29 October, 1997, *ADST*.

protests about the election, the senator's strategy certainly contributed to right-wing animosity toward Pickering.

Secondly, regardless of which narrative of events was accurate, the Pickering plot – as with ARENA's distribution of the Helms letter – illustrated the efficiency and effectiveness of the senator's network. D'Aubuisson was immediately informed of the administration reaction to the plot, whether intended by the White House or not, and just as swiftly made aware of Reagan's alarm. A potentially disastrous incident had been averted because of the close connections within Helms' information network. Later, it was claimed that the White House again used the senator's network as an instrument through which to affect immediate action. Max Kampelman, a senior American diplomat attending Duarte's inauguration at the start of June, was certain that the senator's network had an ability to reach the Salvadoran right more rapidly and with more influence than anyone else. It was Helms to whom he and George Shultz turned for help while en route to the ceremony when another assassination scare was reported.⁵⁵²

Helms was so well informed throughout the election period that the Senate Intelligence Committee leadership became convinced that Helms must have inappropriately used classified information from congressional briefings. Senators Barry Goldwater and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) issued an unprecedented rebuke to Helms.⁵⁵³ The warning was passed to Senate leaders, who in turn wrote to all members reminding them to “exercise especial care before discussing intelligence matters.”⁵⁵⁴ As Helms and his staff noted, however, their information had been gleaned

⁵⁵² Max M. Kampelman, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 24 June, 2003, *ADST*.

⁵⁵³ Martin Tolchin, “Helms Is Reportedly Rebuked in Senate,” *The New York Times*, 16 May, 1984, A3.

⁵⁵⁴ Helen Dewar, “Senators Warned About Disclosures,” *Washington Post*, 18 May, 1984, A26.

from Salvadoran sources, not official briefing material supplied to members of Congress. Senate intelligence had “absolutely nothing” to offer that “you couldn’t get out of the newspaper”, DeMoss noted later.⁵⁵⁵ Helms’ network afforded the senator a flexibility few other lawmakers enjoyed. He was not bound by the Senate’s rigid disclosure rules because he received the majority of his information from sources outside the legislative and executive branches.

In the aftermath of the Pickering plot, while most observers were inclined to see the threat as evidence of D’Aubuisson’s continuing contribution to instability and violence in El Salvador, Helms and his staff used the same events to legitimise the ARENA candidate as a viable leader of Salvadoran politics. They strongly contested his links to the plot, and emphasised his productive role in preventing any attempt on Pickering’s life. “I can’t tell you what was in the cable,” Helms told journalists enquiring about his knowledge of the plot, “but I can tell you what was not. Roberto D’Aubuisson was never mentioned.”⁵⁵⁶ DeMoss described D’Aubuisson as “concerned” and keen to help the administration when informed of the plot.⁵⁵⁷ Much later, DeMoss continued to paint D’Aubuisson in a flattering light, remembering how the major was “just floored” by the accusations during their phone call, described them as “absolutely outrageous”, and promised to denounce them the next day.⁵⁵⁸

These arguments were part of a much wider campaign by the senator to defend D’Aubuisson. It was an implicit acknowledgement that the negative publicity surrounding the major was damaging conservatism in El

⁵⁵⁵ Martin Tolchin, “Helms a Focus of Controversy On Disclosure of Senate Data,” *The New York Times*, 17 May, 1984, A1, and Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 249.

⁵⁵⁶ Gelb, “D’Aubuisson Role in Plot Uncertain,” 10.

⁵⁵⁷ Omang, “U.S. Feared Slaying of Envoy Here,” A18.

⁵⁵⁸ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 250.

Salvador and tilting the game in favour of Duarte. If Reagan were to insist on a democratic political solution, Helms wanted a level playing field. Stories, often leaked by anonymous officials, damaged this prospect. D'Aubuisson, Helms argued, 'was never given the opportunity by the State Department or the media to confront his accusers', and consistently had to contend with an 'underground campaign of malicious accusations.'⁵⁵⁹

Helms staked out a role as the counter to this campaign, and turned the election-tampering scandal into a vehicle for insulating D'Aubuisson from criticism. Helms had steered clear of even mentioning the Salvadoran in his letter to Reagan and next-day speech to the Senate, but he reversed course during his 8 May speech to condemn the charges levelled at D'Aubuisson. Dismissing references to 'so-called right-wing death squads' as 'media jargon' – language previously used by M. Stanton Evans in *Human Events* – Helms blamed Robert White's 'slanderous' comments about the major.⁵⁶⁰ He specifically outlined his own investigation into the matter, ascribing himself a level of interest and expertise in the case that sought to persuade his colleagues:

I personally made inquiries of every agency and every high official in the U.S. Government that I judged to be in a position to know the truth. In almost every case, I was told, in effect, that there was no credible evidence, but that it would be impolitic to say so. There were, however, one or two who said yes, there was evidence linking Mr. D'Aubuisson to the death squads; but when pressed for specifics, they backed down, saying there was nothing that would hold up in court. I am still waiting for any

⁵⁵⁹ Helms, "The Election Results In El Salvador," *Cong. Rec.* 130 (1984), 11249.

⁵⁶⁰ M. Stanton Evans, "In Search of Death Squads," *Human Events*, 31 March, 1984, 7.

specific evidence, whether it would hold up in court or not. I invite any official of the administration to put it forward.⁵⁶¹

Helms even met with CIA director William Casey, and Casey was unable to provide evidence of D'Aubuisson's connections to death squads.⁵⁶²

It should be noted that, while Helms was D'Aubuisson's most prominent patron in the United States, the senator did not operate alone. Several other members of movement conservatism also worked to strengthen D'Aubuisson's credibility. *Human Events*, despite acknowledging that the major had 'raised concerns', devoted itself to guarding his reputation.⁵⁶³ It repeatedly questioned the damaging accusations made against D'Aubuisson, and amplified Helms' own work by commenting favourably on the senator's pivotal role in condemning the Reagan administration for its approach to the Salvadoran.⁵⁶⁴ *National Review*, far less inclined to openly promote D'Aubuisson, nevertheless pushed back against stories linking D'Aubuisson to Archbishop Romero's assassination (in doing so, repeating Helms' own rebuke of White for not acknowledging the possibility of left-wing complicity in the murder).⁵⁶⁵ Among other members of Congress, devoted movement conservatives like Rep. Eldon (a fluent Spanish speaker who had spent time in Mexico serving with the FBI, and who was a prominent supporter of the Somoza dynasty) lent their voices to the campaign to portray D'Aubuisson as the only viable leader for

⁵⁶¹ Helms, "The Election Results In El Salvador," *Cong. Rec.* 130 (1984), 11249-11250.

⁵⁶² Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 248.

⁵⁶³ "Where's the Evidence Against D'Aubuisson," *Human Events*, 31 December, 1983, 3.

⁵⁶⁴ "Case Against D'Aubuisson Still Falls Flat," *Human Events*, 17 March, 1984, 6, "Why the Campaign Against D'Aubuisson," *Human Events*, 10 March, 1984, 1, and "White Expands Campaign To Destroy D'Aubuisson," *Human Events*, 18 February, 3-4.

⁵⁶⁵ "The Week," *National Review*, 6 April, 1984, 15.

El Salvador. It was D'Aubuisson, Rudd told the president, who had 'the guts, the will and the courage to eject the terrorist-communists from El Salvador and establish a stable government friendly to and supportive of the United States.'⁵⁶⁶

This campaign to defend D'Aubuisson actually intensified in the aftermath of the election and assassination episodes. Helms adopted a two-step strategy. His first move was to travel to El Salvador in June, ostensibly to attend Duarte's inauguration. While there, Helms met secretly with D'Aubuisson to persuade the Salvadoran that he should avoid provocative action and accept the role of "loyal opposition".⁵⁶⁷ The senator reportedly told D'Aubuisson, "You'd better pray that Ambassador Pickering is not hit by a bread truck, because *The New York Times* will have that truck registered to your name by tomorrow morning."⁵⁶⁸ Helms had not initially been included on the Department of State's list of recommended attendees at the inauguration, with Senators Baker and Byrd (or their respective designees) named the agency's preferred guests from the upper house, and was only added at the suggestion of conservative NSC staffers Jacqueline Tillman and Constantine Menges.⁵⁶⁹ The implication is that those in the

⁵⁶⁶ Letter, Representative Eldon Rudd to President Reagan, 6 April, 1984, folder "El Salvador [03/28/1984 - 04/22/1984] Box 90378," Box 1, Constantine Menges Files, *RRL*.

⁵⁶⁷ Memorandum, George P. Shultz to President Reagan, "Memorandum for the President: El Salvador," folder "El Salvador (05/16/1984 - 06/19/1984) [Too late to file]," Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country Files, El Salvador, Box 30, *RRL*.

⁵⁶⁸ "Duarte Inauguration," Confidential, Cable San Salvador, 06262, 2 June, 1984, *DNSA*, Hedrick Smith, "Salvadoran's Visa Tied To His Help," *The New York Times*, 26 June, 1984, A6, and Omang, "U.S. Feared Slaying of Envoy Here," A1.

⁵⁶⁹ Memorandum, Charles Hill to Robert C. McFarlane and John S. Herrington, "U.S. Delegation to the Salvadoran Inauguration," 22 May, 1984, folder "El Salvador (4/1/84 - 5/31/84) (1)," Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country Files, El Salvador Box 30, *RRL*, and Memorandum, Jacqueline Tillman, Constantine C. Menges, and Christopher Lehman to Robert C. McFarlane, "Duarte Inauguration/Composition of Delegation," 24 May,

administration who may have been most sympathetic to D'Aubuisson sought an intermediary who could gain access to the major.

Helms' presence was ironic. State told the White House that, 'given charges that the United States has stage-managed the election process,' a low-key delegation was preferable so as 'not to dominate the inauguration.'⁵⁷⁰ Helms' attendance, given his role in publicising these accusations, undercut the department. Yet Helms' conversation with D'Aubuisson evidently proved persuasive- and, in the longer term, beneficial to the administration. D'Aubuisson signalled he would continue to participate in the fledgling Salvadoran democratic process. The White House, pleased that the major's presence legitimised the political solution, responded by granting D'Aubuisson a travel visa.⁵⁷¹ The visa allowed D'Aubuisson to complete a visit to the United States in late June that Helms and his staff organised. It constituted the next step in Helms' attempts to legitimise D'Aubuisson, by promoting the Salvadoran more extensively among Washington policy-makers and the American public. "He [D'Aubuisson] has not had an opportunity to present his views", said Helms' principal foreign policy aide, Jim Lucier. "We think this would be a good opportunity."⁵⁷² After the visit, Helms emphasised D'Aubuisson's contribution to Salvadoran democracy:

1984, folder "El Salvador (4/1/84 - 5/31/84) (1)," Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country Files, El Salvador Box 30, *RRL*.

⁵⁷⁰ Memorandum, Charles Hill to Robert C. McFarlane and John S. Herrington, "U.S. Delegation to the Salvadoran Inauguration," 22 May, 1984, folder "El Salvador (4/1/84 - 5/31/84) (1)," Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country Files, El Salvador Box 30, *RRL*.

⁵⁷¹ Smith, "Salvadoran's Visa Tied To His Help," A6, and Goshko, "D'Aubuisson's Cooperation Seen As Vital," A8.

⁵⁷² "Salvadoran Rightist Tied to Murder Plot Will Meet Senators," *The New York Times*, 25 June, 1984, A9.

He is the head of a political party consisting of businessmen and farmers and responsible citizens in El Salvador, a party that got 46 percent of the vote despite the fact that the bureaucracy in the State Department [provided] about two or three million [dollars] of the tax-payers money in support of a far-left candidate.⁵⁷³

For most senators, in both parties, and the Reagan administration too, D'Aubuisson remained a toxic entity. No administration official appeared in public with D'Aubuisson, and only a handful of conservative lawmakers met the Salvadoran.⁵⁷⁴ Helms began to suffer from his public association with D'Aubuisson. Their relationship threatened to derail his Senate re-election campaign. Helms' Democratic opponent, Governor James Hunt, directed attention toward the senator's relationship with D'Aubuisson throughout the race.⁵⁷⁵ In particular, Hunt's camp released what became known as the "dead bodies ad". Over images of several corpses, accompanied by a soundtrack of gunfire, the advert's narrator called the senator D'Aubuisson's "best friend in Washington". "Jesse Helms may be a crusader," the spot argued, "but this is not what our senator should be crusading for."⁵⁷⁶

There were suggestions that the increased scrutiny of Helms' connection with D'Aubuisson led the senator to distance himself from the Salvadoran's Washington visit. Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK), not Helms, led

⁵⁷³ Helen Dewar, "Senate Race in North Carolina Is a Southern-Fried Alley Fight," *Washington Post*, 6 July, 1984, A4.

⁵⁷⁴ Joanne Omang, "Key Officials Avoid Meeting Salvadoran," *Washington Post*, 28 June, 1984, A25.

⁵⁷⁵ Helen Dewar, "Hunt Goes on Offensive In Debate With Helms," *Washington Post*, 30 July, 1984, A3.

⁵⁷⁶ Dewar, "Senate Race in North Carolina," A4, and Joel Brinkley, "Article Stirs New Charges in Carolina Senate Race," *The New York Times*, 7 July, 1984, 7.

D'Aubuisson around Capitol Hill and invited all one hundred senators to meet with the major, telling journalists, "it's [better] to keep someone in the system than to shut him out."⁵⁷⁷ But the fact remains that Helms never refuted his association with D'Aubuisson. Indeed, he directly linked his connections with the Salvadoran right to his national security credentials. "Yes, sir," Helms replied to Hunt when the governor mentioned death squads, "I plead guilty about being opposed to communism and doing everything I can to stop it."⁵⁷⁸

The senator's belligerent response to criticism of his policies in El Salvador was helped by the lack of resonance to foreign policy issues in the North Carolina Senate election race. "Who the hell is this Doe-bee-sown character", asked Helms' constituents, and Hunt's own pollsters admitted focus groups in North Carolina did not understand the governor's emphasis on Central America issues.⁵⁷⁹ Yet Helms' comments demonstrated the priority he unashamedly attached to his anti-communism and why he maintained, despite intense criticism, his close relationship with D'Aubuisson.

Helms' refusal to compromise over a military solution to El Salvador's civil war led him to embrace the Reagan administration's narrative of democracy in that country, but challenge its implications. He had hardly been an enthusiastic advocate of democratic reform in Latin America prior to 1982. In his policy blueprint for the region, written in 1976, Helms described Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay as beacons of progress in the region.⁵⁸⁰ All, at that time, were under military rule. In the

⁵⁷⁷ Omang, "Key Officials Avoid Meeting Salvadoran," A25, and Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 251.

⁵⁷⁸ Dewar, "Hunt Goes on Offensive In Debate With Helms," A3.

⁵⁷⁹ Dewar, "Senate Race in North Carolina Is a Southern-Fried Alley Fight," A4.

⁵⁸⁰ Helms, "A New Policy for Latin America," 15-20.

intervening years, Helms added Bolivia to the list. He and his staff promoted the government of Luis Garcia Meza, despite its origins in a 1980 military coup.⁵⁸¹ “I am impressed with the progress Bolivia has made in recent months in providing security for its citizens,” Helms wrote Meza in December 1980, “which is among the most fundamental of human rights”.⁵⁸² Supporting non-elected governments in the western hemisphere was justifiable to him because internal security was paramount. A free ballot box, Helms had argued in 1976, was only a secondary right for any country’s people.⁵⁸³

In El Salvador, however, democratic reform promised a publicly palatable instrument by which to ensure this security. When the 1982 legislative assembly elections demonstrated widespread support for D’Aubuisson and ARENA’s militaristic anti-communism, Helms grasped the opportunity to legitimise full-scale war on the insurgency through the ballot box. Reagan’s rhetoric of democracy empowered Helms because the senator could throw off the stigma of his, and conservatism’s, association with authoritarianism in the region. He was able to maintain his commitment to a military solution while also portraying himself as the guardian of the democratic process in El Salvador.

Helms’ stringent criticism of the administration for its intervention in the Salvadoran democratic process belied the fact that both he and the White House agreed on wider goals in El Salvador. There was never any question that, like Helms, the Reagan administration sought a military victory over the insurgency. Its commitment to democratic and economic

⁵⁸¹ James Dunkerley, *Rebellion in the Veins: Political Struggle in Bolivia, 1952-1982* (London: Verso Editions, 1984), 284-291.

⁵⁸² Karen DeYoung, “Bolivians Defy U.S. with Blitz Wreath-Laying,” *Washington Post*, 27 November, 1980, A21, and Joel Brinkley, “Helms and Rightists: Long History of Friendship,” *The New York Times*, 1 August, 1984, A20.

⁵⁸³ Helms, “A New Policy,” 20.

reform in El Salvador was a tactic to facilitate congressional support for this armed solution. Reagan found as president that power required responsibility.⁵⁸⁴ He increasingly spoke of flexibility, restraint, and realism: what was possible, not necessarily desirable.⁵⁸⁵ A joint political-military policy was a realistic policy. Decisive military victory over the insurgency was desirable. Achieving this by supporting Duarte and political moderates could make it possible.

'The fight is not yet over': Resisting Peace, 1989-1992

In the aftermath of the 1984 Salvadoran presidential elections, U.S. media outlets and political elites in both Congress and the White House allowed the civil war to slip from the foreign policy agenda. Duarte's popularity in Washington ensured that U.S. assistance continued to flow, despite corruption and infighting among Christian Democrats that made the party, and its leader, unpopular in El Salvador itself. The military situation stagnated, with neither side capable of delivering a fatal blow. American officials no longer predicted imminent victory as they had in their more confident moments at the start of the decade, but they were less fearful of the FMLN victory that had seemed imminent during the crisis years of 1982 to 1984. El Salvador, as LeoGrande summarises, retreated from American politics, 'slipping out of sight and out of mind.'⁵⁸⁶

Helms' interest in El Salvador followed a similar trajectory. Increasingly focused on the Contra war and, from 1986 onwards, the fate of Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega, the senator devoted substantially less of his time to El Salvador. El Salvador continued to be central to his understanding of Central American instability, but the few public speeches

⁵⁸⁴ Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy*, 300-303.

⁵⁸⁵ Justin D. Garrison, *"An Empire of Ideals": The Chimeric Imagination of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 100.

⁵⁸⁶ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 282.

and relative paucity of legislative entrepreneurship indicated a re-ordering of his congressional resources. By early 1988, such was the shift in focus, his regular meetings with Reagan's new National Security Adviser, General Colin Powell, began to omit El Salvador as a specific item of discussion.⁵⁸⁷

Helms' shifting focus was symptomatic of a wider trend among conservatives. Those who had been most supportive of the Reagan administration's policies in El Salvador seemed particularly content with the post-1984 environment. *National Review*, while criticising Duarte for his decision in November 1984 to engage in direct talks with the guerrillas, nevertheless concluded the following year that the lack of attention on the country was because of the 'things are improving.'⁵⁸⁸ H. Joachim Maitre, writing for *Strategic Review* in Winter 1985, also declared that the conflict was 'winding down', with the guerrillas 'farther from victory than ever before'. Maitre's commentary was later published in Walter Hahn's 1987 overview of the Reagan Doctrine in Central America, complete with laudatory introduction from Jeane Kirkpatrick. This further served to emphasise the sense of satisfaction among many conservatives over the administration's handling of the civil war.⁵⁸⁹

Even *Human Events*, the most consistent barometer of a Helmsian position on El Salvador, reduced its interest, though it continued to lament the disastrous effects of the Duarte presidency. Of the 869 articles relating to El Salvador published by *Human Events* between January 1981 and December 1989, 507 appeared between January 1981 and December 1984,

⁵⁸⁷ Memo, Alison B. Fortier to Colin L. Powell, 30 March, 1988, ID598950, FG006-12, WHORM: Subject File, *RRL*.

⁵⁸⁸ "Duarte Negotiates," *National Review*, 16 November, 1984, 19, and Laura Ingraham, "Good News from El Salvador," *National Review*, 23 August, 1985, 17.

⁵⁸⁹ H. Joachim Maitre, "The Dying War in El Salvador," in *Central America and the Reagan Doctrine*, Walter F. Hahn, ed. (Boston: The Centre for International Relations, 1987), 121.

and 357 were published between January 1985 and December 1989. *National Review* saw an even steeper decline. Of seventy-nine pieces relating to El Salvador between January 1981 and December 1989, all but twelve were published during the first half of the decade.⁵⁹⁰

In 1989, however, Helms returned to Salvadoran affairs with a new sense of purpose. The catalyst was that year's Salvadoran presidential election, in which ARENA's Alfredo Cristiani defeated the Christian Democrats' Fidel Chávez Mena. The Christian Democrats had suffered a rapid drop in popularity among a Salvadoran electorate disillusioned with continuing economic stagnation, interminable civil war, and pervasive corruption among government officials. After losing their majority in the Constituent Assembly in 1988 elections, Cristiani's success marked a substantial shift in the political landscape. Cristiani's more moderate leadership, compared to D'Aubuisson's, and impressive grass-roots election campaign produced a sweeping ARENA victory.⁵⁹¹ For Helms and the anti-PDC conservative faction in the United States, this was both a validation of their philosophy and an opportunity to reshape the story of democratisation in Central America.

The joy among American movement conservatives at ARENA's electoral achievements manifested in a swift effort by Helms and his allies in Washington to herald Cristiani as a populist, Reagan-esque figure capable of leading El Salvador out of its military and economic stagnation.

⁵⁹⁰ Data taken from ProQuest, using search term "El Salvador". For examples of *Human Events*' criticism post-1984, see Deroy Murdock, "Strong Second Party Emerging in El Salvador," 22 August, 1987, 10, Virginia Prewett, "Why Land Reform Has Failed in El Salvador," *Human Events*, 22 February, 1986, 14, and Virginia Prewett, "'Moderate' Duarte Harasses Pro-Democracy Paper," *Human Events*, 15 June, 1985, 16.

⁵⁹¹ Chris Norton, "The Hard Right: ARENA Comes to Power," in *A Decade of War: El Salvador Confronts the Future*, eds. Anjali Sundaram and George Gelber (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1991), 196, and Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador*, 208.

Alan Ryskind, writing in *Human Events*, praised the new Salvadoran president as 'holding Reaganite views on domestic and foreign policy', while Helms called the new ARENA government 'natural allies' of the United States and said its principles were shared by 'mainstream Americans'.⁵⁹²

For Helms, Cristiani's election not only exonerated the pure conservatism he had been striving to impart on the Reagan administration, but it also provided leverage at home. Richard Lugar, for example, whom Helms had battled over Central America policy and for the chairmanship of the Foreign Relations Committee after the 1986 Senate elections, was subjected to intense criticism when it emerged he would be leading the American delegation to Cristiani's inauguration. Writing to Bush's Chief of Staff, John Sununu, Helms wryly noted that his fellow Republican's 'interest in this trip is something of an anomaly'. Lugar 'has never supported the ARENA party, nor Mr. Cristiani, a well-known fact in El Salvador', and, Helms continued, 'despite the fact he was bound to have known what was going on', never publicly commented on the secret operation to support Duarte in 1984. In contrast, Helms referred to Cristiani as 'my good friend', and reminded the administration that ARENA was 'aware' of Lugar's record.⁵⁹³

Helms' optimism was challenged in November 1989 when the FMLN mounted a surprise offensive in San Salvador. The speed, scale, and location of the violence shocked Americans who had grown accustomed to stalemate in El Salvador, and commentators rekindled the Vietnam analogy

⁵⁹² Alan Ryskind, "Cristiani Wins 'Free and Fair' Election in El Salvador," *Human Events*, 1 April, 1989, 5-6, and Jesse Helms (NC), "Inauguration Day In El Salvador," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 10510.

⁵⁹³ Letter, Senator Jesse Helms to John Sununu, 25 May, 1989, ID040270, C0046, WHORM: Subject File, *George Bush Library* (hereafter *GBL*).

with references to the 1968 Tet Offensive.⁵⁹⁴ For those, like Helms, who had lauded the Cristiani government for making progress against both the FMLN and the more repressive elements of the armed forces, worse news was to follow. In the midst of the offensive, as government troops battled guerrillas in the capital's upper-class districts, elite counterinsurgency soldiers went to the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) and executed several Jesuit priests studying and working there, as well their housekeeper and her fifteen-year-old daughter. The murders brought international condemnation of the Salvadoran government and once more imperilled U.S. aid for the counterinsurgency campaign.⁵⁹⁵

As one of the principal advocates of both the Cristiani government and a militarised solution to the civil war, Helms' immediate concern was the fate of the aid programme. With many legislators and their constituents – especially religious orders – immediately accusing the armed forces of the murders, the White House and Congress found themselves under significant pressure to terminate assistance.⁵⁹⁶ Helms felt 'obliged', as he put it, to respond to those blaming the army 'without any evidence'. Their calls to stop arming the Salvadoran military in the wake of the killings were 'irresponsible', he said, and such individuals threatened to once again 'walk away from the brave men and women who are fighting communism in this hemisphere.' '[B]oth sides in the conflict had ample motivation to perpetrate this crime', Helms declared, and it was 'just as reasonable, if not more so, to look toward the FMLN as the perpetrators of this crime, as it is

⁵⁹⁴ "Salvador's Tet," *Washington Post*, 15 November, 1989, A20, Lee Hockstader, "Salvadoran Rebels Hold Their Ground," *Washington Post*, 15 November, 1989, A1, and James Dunkerley, "Backing an unwinnable war," *Guardian*, 1 December, 1989, 12.

⁵⁹⁵ Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, 247-248.

⁵⁹⁶ The George Bush Library's El Salvador country file contains a large quantity of highly critical letters about the Jesuit murders, many of which were forwarded from members of Congress. For these letters, see the files under CO046, WHORM: Subject File, *GBL*.

to rush to judgment, as some are doing, against some nebulous assailants from the Salvadoran military.⁵⁹⁷

Helms offered two different justifications for the murders, both of which perpetuated the conservative mantra that the Jesuits were understandable, perhaps even legitimate, victims of El Salvador's violence. His first explanation rested on the assumption that the FMLN, angered by the Jesuits' recent criticism of their offensive, killed the priests in retribution, albeit disguised as government soldiers. It was a theory partly supported by internal analysis by both Defense and State Department officials, though the latter were more inclined to blame the military.⁵⁹⁸ Helms talked of AK-47s, the guerrillas' weapon of choice, and stolen uniforms, forming part of a supposed St. Valentine's Day massacre-style set-up, and concluded it was 'not inconceivable that the terrorists, the FMLN, decided that new martyrs were necessary in order to breathe new life into their dying offensive'. 'It would be better to have them dead as martyrs', Helms suggested, 'than living and criticizing the bloody revolution that they had played such a key role in starting.'⁵⁹⁹

Yet even as he speculated on FMLN culpability, Helms also suggested that the Jesuits were understandable targets for those seeking to defeat the guerrillas:

⁵⁹⁷ Jesse Helms (NC), "Let Us Keep Our Facts Straight," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 30484.

⁵⁹⁸ "El Salvador," [Complete Memorandum Not Attached], Confidential, Memorandum, 16 November, 1989, *DNSA*, and "Jesuit Rector of UCA Shot Dead; Seven Others Killed," Confidential, Cable, 16 November, 1989, *DNSA*.

⁵⁹⁹ Helms, "Let Us Keep Our Facts Straight," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 30485. Teresa Whitfield, who investigated the Jesuit murder case, points out that AK-47s were actually a frequently used weapon in the army's special operations. Teresa Whitfield, *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuría and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 10.

It is true that some Salvadorans looked upon the victims as the leading propagandists for the Communist guerrillas, and as particularly nefarious because they had trained the FMLN leadership at the university. But the discovery of an FMLN cache of arms at the Jesuit retreat house [during the earlier search conducted by the army] must have confirmed that this group was working against the best interests of the Salvadoran people, rich and poor alike.⁶⁰⁰

Having announced the week before that weapons and ammunition had been captured throughout San Salvador during the FMLN offensive, 'most notably' at Central America University and the Jesuit retreat house, the senator implied the Jesuits were playing a critical role in destabilising El Salvador.⁶⁰¹

It was an account that had ominous parallels with the Salvadoran right's relentless persecution of the Jesuits in previous decades. From the 1970s, when death squad pamphlets and graffiti urged Salvadorans to "Be a patriot. Kill a priest", through to the late 1980s when conservative civic associations described the Jesuits teaching at UCA as "terrorists" requiring "justice", conservative Salvadorans targeted progressive clergy for supposed revolutionary activism.⁶⁰² As a leading scholar and proponent of liberation theology, which advocated radical social, economic, and political change in pursuit of a more just society, the rector of the university, Ignacio Ellacuría was an especially prominent target. His outspoken criticism of the armed forces and role as an intermediary for the FMLN aroused

⁶⁰⁰ Helms, "Let Us Keep Our Facts Straight," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 30484.

⁶⁰¹ Jesse Helms (NC), "Foreign Operations, Export Financing, And Related Programs Appropriations, Fiscal Year 1990 -- Conference Report," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 29160.

⁶⁰² Anna L. Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 62-65, and Whitfield, *Paying the Price*, 331-332.

conservative anger, and he had previously faced exile after appearing on death-squad lists.⁶⁰³ In the run-up to his murder, the army had forced all Salvadoran radio stations to broadcast a call-in show in which those taking part called for the deaths of FMLN collaborators, including Ellacuría.⁶⁰⁴ Just hours before the killings, Roberto D'Aubuisson had briefed supporters about the danger posed by the Jesuits. The U.S. embassy called the links between the major's inflammatory rhetoric and the murders 'difficult to dismiss as mere coincidence.'⁶⁰⁵

It also brought the divisions in Cold War Christianity into sharper focus. For Andrew Preston, studying the role of religion in U.S. foreign policy, the conflict did not unify American Christians in a common crusade against the Soviet Union, but highlighted often radically different visions for the nation's foreign policy.⁶⁰⁶ The Jesuit case, like the murder of several American Maryknoll nuns by the Salvadoran military in 1980, reflected the wider struggle between these contrasting ideas. Helms articulated a militant, apocalyptic anti-communist Christianity that understood progressive Christian doctrines such as liberation theology to be little more than Marxism masquerading as religion. Alberto Piedra, appointed as U.S.

⁶⁰³ Michael E. Lee, "Liberation Theology's Transcendent Moment: The Work of Xavier Zubiri and Ignacio Ellacuría as Noncontrastive Discourse," *The Journal of Religion* 83, No. 2 (April, 2003), 226. Translations of liberation works by Ellacuría and the other murdered Jesuits can be found in John J. Hassett and Hugh Lacey, eds., *Towards a Society that Serves its People: The Intellectual Contribution of El Salvador's Murdered Jesuits* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991). For a specific analysis of Ellacuría's life and theological positions, see Kevin F. Burke, *The Ground Beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000), and Whitfield, *Paying the Price*. See also "Information on Ignacio Ellacuria," Classification Excised, Cable, 11 November, 1981, *DNSA*.

⁶⁰⁴ Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, 249.

⁶⁰⁵ "Killing of Dr. Ignacio Ellacuria," Classification Excised, Intelligence Memorandum, 17 November, 1989, *DNSA*.

⁶⁰⁶ Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, 415.

ambassador to Guatemala in 1984 on the advice of Helms and friendly with administration hawks like Jeane Kirkpatrick, declared the doctrine 'not only tries to adapt Christianity to Marxian theory or to the strategic needs of the praxis of liberation, but it attempts to build a new Christianity, a new Church, on the foundations of Marxism.'⁶⁰⁷

To make matters worse, conservatives believed the Soviet Union cynically appropriated liberation theology as a tool to legitimise its foreign policies in the Third World.⁶⁰⁸ Helms' distrust of the Jesuits can be seen as part of a Southern Baptist sentiment that had, in the past, looked with particular animosity on Catholicism during the Cold War. Seeing Catholics as beholden to a totalitarian faith, in contrast to their more democratic philosophy, some Southern Baptists consistently opposed alliances with Catholics in the quest for victory over the Soviet Union.⁶⁰⁹ In any case, the religious component that liberation theology added to the Salvadoran crisis further intensified the Cold War ideological framework placed on El Salvador.⁶¹⁰ The senator's comments were intended to undermine both the rationale and accomplishments of a religious activism that, as Peterson argues, achieved widespread influence in El Salvador during the 1970s and 1980s.⁶¹¹

With one or two exceptions – notably Bob Dornan, who believed the killers were most likely 'psychopathic killers on the far right' – U.S. conservatives were quick to admonish those who immediately blamed the

⁶⁰⁷ Alberto M. Piedra, "Some Observations on Liberation Theology," *World Affairs* 148, No. 3 (Winter, 1985-1986), 156.

⁶⁰⁸ Marlan Leighton, "The Soviets, the Pope, and Liberation Theology," *Human Events*, 23 March, 1985, 12.

⁶⁰⁹ Matthew J. Hall, "Cold Warriors in the Sunbelt: Southern Baptists and the Cold War, 1947-1989," Ph.D. Diss., University of Kentucky, 2014, 212.

⁶¹⁰ Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, 86-87.

⁶¹¹ Peterson, *Martyrdom*, 177-180.

Salvadoran right.⁶¹² *Human Events* told its readers there was ‘no evidence whatsoever’ of government involvement and allegations of right-wing complicity were mere allegations, while Don Nickles, the Oklahoma Republican senator, cautioned his colleagues that it was ‘a little premature’ to apportion blame.⁶¹³ *National Review* accepted it was possible the killers had been army personnel, but noted ‘on the principle of *cui bono?* (who benefits?) it is also possible they were killed by Communists wearing army uniforms.’⁶¹⁴ The driving force behind all these assertions was a concern, shared by Helms, that Congress would not only terminate assistance but also push harder for a negotiated settlement to end the violence.

Indeed, such fears proved to be well founded. The Jesuit murder case rapidly accelerated the momentum toward a negotiated peace. With the wisdom of violent repression in doubt, Cristiani and other pragmatic ARENA politicians found themselves in a stronger position to override the military’s institutional resistance to a negotiated peace. As U.S. military aid declined in the early 1990s, the military diminished as a political force. Moreover, with the FMLN benefiting from a modernised arsenal obtained from the Sandinistas, defeating the guerrillas on the battlefield became an ever more remote proposition.⁶¹⁵ In January 1992, after months of painstaking arbitration by the United Nations, ARENA and the guerrillas ended twelve years of civil war with Treaty of Chapultepec.

For Helms, the agreement was ‘no more than a piece of paper.’ Convinced that ‘genuine peace’ would only occur once the FMLN

⁶¹² Robert Dornan (CA), “Stop The Communists, Stop The Killings,” *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 17 November, 29886.

⁶¹³ “Democrats Side with FMLN Against Cristiani,” *Human Events*, 2 December, 1989, 4, and Don Nickles (OK), “El Salvador,” *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 29681.

⁶¹⁴ “El Salvador: Keep Your Eye on the Ball,” *National Review*, 22 December, 1989, 13.

⁶¹⁵ Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, 249-259.

dismantled itself, he declared negotiations with the guerrillas were the 'height of folly'. Rather than supporting Chapultepec, the United States 'should provide as much military assistance as necessary to El Salvador in order to enable the people of that country to continue to work toward real peace from a position of strength.'⁶¹⁶ The senator had opposed each attempt by Congress to cut the military assistance budget for El Salvador during the early 1990s, allying with a committed group of conservative senators who saw continued FMLN activity as an affront to the peace process.⁶¹⁷ Helms' strategy had little impact on a Congress determined to reduce military aid as the fledgling peace agreement took shape, but it nevertheless sustained his reputation among those conservatives who continued to believe the Cold War was raging in El Salvador.⁶¹⁸

It was a sentiment almost entirely out of sync with congressional, administration, and mainstream Salvadoran opinion. While some Salvadorans to the right of Cristiani shared Helms' opinion, the disintegration of the Soviet Union persuaded many in the country's conservative community that the external driving force behind the FMLN had evaporated, thus making negotiations a more palatable proposition.⁶¹⁹

Helms' frustrated response reflected this changed policy environment. His brand of chauvinistic anti-communism, reliant on the image of a Soviet Union as an intractable expansionist foe, had little

⁶¹⁶ Jesse Helms (NC), "Further Continuing Appropriations, Fiscal Year 1992," *Cong. Rec.* 138 (1992), 7747.

⁶¹⁷ This group included old allies like Steve Symms, Malcolm Wallop, and Don Nickles. For Helms' voting record on cutting military aid to El Salvador, see "Rollcall Vote No. 311 Leg.," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 30519, "Rollcall Vote No. 293 Leg.," *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 31255, "Rollcall Vote No. 256 Leg.," *Cong. Rec.* 138 (1992), 29303.

⁶¹⁸ "Conservative Forum," *Human Events*, 18 April, 1992, 18, and "Conservative Forum," *Human Events*, 10 August, 1991, 18.

⁶¹⁹ Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador*, 228, and Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, 252-253.

relevance for El Salvador in a new unipolar world. The collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991, as well as the demise of the Sandinista government in neighbouring Nicaragua in 1990, rendered the senator's fears about external intervention in El Salvador moot. Furthermore, whereas Central America had dominated the nation's foreign policy agenda for a decade and a half, the Bush administration acted to reduce the United States' involvement in its neighbours' affairs. Accepting the United Nations as a mediation partner for the Salvadoran peace process was just one example of the administration's desire to find a quick and effective solution to the region's instability while lessening the United States' direct presence.

Helms and his movement allies might well have sought continued military aid, but their rhetoric lacked resonance with those Salvadorans negotiating the peace process. Military stalemate, the demise of wider Cold War considerations, and recognition by Salvadorans – especially the country's private sector – that stability and economic growth was only possible through peace, motivated both sides of the civil war to seek reconciliation.⁶²⁰ At the same time, Bush's moderation, combined with congressional pressure for aid cuts, fostered a political environment in the U.S. in which conservative, militarised Cold War policies floundered.⁶²¹

Indeed, calls for military aid directly threatened the nascent peace process by supporting what Stanley describes as the by-now 'discredited' 'coercive strategy' represented by El Salvador's army. The momentum toward peace had built precisely because armed resolution proved

⁶²⁰ Angelika Rettberg, "The Private Sector and Peace in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Colombia," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 39, No. 3 (August, 2007), 468-473, Antonio Cañas and Héctor Dada, "Political Transition and Institutionalization in El Salvador," in *Comparative Peace Processes in Latin America*, ed. Cynthia J. Arnson (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1999), 72-73, and Tricia Juhn, *Negotiating Peace in El Salvador: Civil-Military Relations and the Conspiracy to End the War* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1998), 44-81.

⁶²¹ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 577.

impossible, and ARENA's influence over the army had increased partly because U.S. military aid declined.⁶²²

Helms' decision to convince D'Aubuisson and ARENA to engage in Salvadoran politics as loyal opposition made a small, but significant, contribution to the longer-term prospects for peace. ARENA's transition away from reactionary extremism toward constructive political engagement in the late 1980s was crucial in providing a vehicle for the oligarchy to participate in competitive politics. This, in turn, facilitated a re-ordering of the civil-military structures of Salvadoran society, as the army proved incapable of resisting the growing influence of the country's powerful entrepreneurial sector.⁶²³ As these elites realised the benefits of peace and stability outweighed the destruction and turmoil of the civil war, momentum built within ARENA for a negotiated settlement.⁶²⁴ Thus, while Helms opposed the peace talks of the early 1990s, his actions half a decade earlier had helped lay early foundations for this very process.

The senator's resistance to talks with the FMLN and his continued commitment to the D'Aubuisson wing of Salvadoran politics meant, however, that Helms remained a significant voice for a conservative foreign policy that did not acknowledge a finished – or even waning – Cold War. 'Too many people equate the collapse of the Soviet empire with the end of communism', he told the Senate in his criticism of El Salvador's peace. While Castro continued to repress his people and export revolution, Helms said, and while the Sandinistas maintained de facto control in Nicaragua,

⁶²² Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, 259.

⁶²³ Juhn, *Negotiating Peace*, 126-127.

⁶²⁴ See Diana Villiers Negroponte, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 59-60, William Deane Stanley, "El Salvador: State Building Before and After Democratization, 1980-95," in *From Nation-Building to State-Building*, ed. Mark T. Berger (London: Routledge, 2008), 104, and William I. Robinson, *Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change and Globalization* (London: Verso, 2003), 90.

external support for communist guerrillas throughout Central America would continue. There also remained the Salvadoran nationalist streak that had long infused his rhetoric on the country's plight, dating back to his support for D'Aubuisson in the early 1980s. 'I will do everything I can to assist the people of El Salvador in their struggle for victory', he claimed, as he voted against 1992 appropriations that sent military aid to the country only in the form of non-lethal material. 'The fight is not yet over.'⁶²⁵

⁶²⁵ Helms, "Further Continuing Appropriations, Fiscal Year 1992," *Cong. Rec.* 138 (1992), 7747-7748, and "Rollcall Vote No. 62. Leg.," *Cong. Rec.* 138 (1992), 7751.

Nicaragua, 1985-1992

The first few years of the Contra campaign had seen Helms largely in lockstep with the Reagan administration over its Nicaragua policy, as he and movement conservatives worked in tandem with a White House keen to emphasise a military solution to its Sandinista problem. The second phase of Helms' activities toward Nicaragua, however, suffered intense turbulence, as he struggled to deal with a rapidly changing policy climate. In the aftermath of the Iran-Contra affair, the Reagan administration was unable to maintain its hard-line approach to Nicaragua, and its political leadership of the Contra cause evaporated as it attempted to deal with the damaging consequences of the scandal. The new policy reality forced Reagan into reluctant support for regional peace talks, and his successor followed by fully accepting a diplomatic and electoral solution. George H. W. Bush pulled back from the Contras to an even greater extent, supporting a mixed coalition of anti-Sandinista political forces in the 1990 Nicaraguan elections, and allowing the Contras to wither away as a policy instrument.

Helms' response to these events illustrated the tensions that suddenly emerged among conservatives over Nicaragua policy. Largely united when faced with President Carter as an opponent, and supportive of Reagan as Contra policy took shape in the early 1980s, conservatism struggled to reconcile itself with the new policy atmosphere of the late 1980s. Helms emerged as a beacon for a pro-Contra community that increasingly argued against Reagan's Nicaragua agenda, after staunchly defending the president and his advisers throughout the Iran-Contra scandal. Subsequently, when George Bush looked to mend the bitter divisions of Central America policy and shift U.S. interest away from the Contras and the Sandinistas, Helms continued to preach a pro-Contra conservative foreign policy that maintained the spotlight on Nicaragua. Like in El Salvador, Helms' policies in Nicaragua in the later 1980s and early 1990s illustrate both the longevity of Cold War conservatism and its frustrated struggle with those

who wished – or were forced – to adopt pragmatism as the price for maintaining at least some control of policy.

'Jesse Helms' Boys': Lew Tambs and the Contras

All of this, however, seemed inconceivable in spring 1985. At this moment, the anti-Sandinista forces enjoyed a sudden upturn in fortunes. Congress showed increasing, albeit still cautious, support for the Contras, because of increasing discontent with the Sandinista government, changes in the composition of the Contras, a perception that the administration had begun to compromise in its approach, and a concerted effort by the president and conservatives to persuade moderates of the validity of their cause.⁶²⁶ Helms contributed to the lobbying effort for a rehabilitated Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua. In Foreign Relations Committee hearings devoted to Central America, he decried those who had 'mutilated' Reagan's policies out of domestic political concerns, even as he reminded those present of an imminent immigration crisis that would bring twenty-five million people flooding into the country. The magnitude of the situation was clear in the options facing the country: it was not 'a choice between a little bit of nonintervention [sic] here and something else. It may be a choice of survival, of freedom in the United States of America.'⁶²⁷ When Contra aid came before the Senate in 1985, Helms told his fellow legislators that they must 'decide whether the United States wants to support freedom and human rights, or whether one more nation will fall by default to Marxism-Leninism.'⁶²⁸

⁶²⁶ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 183.

⁶²⁷ U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *The Situation in Central America*, 19 April, 1985, 16-17.

⁶²⁸ Jesse Helms (NC), "Nicaragua – The Chance to Decide," *Cong. Rec.* 131 (1985), 8837.

Through such efforts, the campaign was able to secure a narrow vote in favour of new funds for the rebels. Yet the senator's role in the resurgent Contra network was not limited to oratory. In one of his most direct contributions to the cause, Helms secured Lewis Tambs the post of Ambassador to Costa Rica in August 1985. According to Tambs' predecessor in Costa Rica, Secretary of State George Shultz permitted the appointment in order to pacify Helms at a time of conservative consternation over a perceived Shultzian 'purge' of conservatives within the State Department.⁶²⁹ The senator had previously pressured the Reagan administration to appoint Tambs as Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, and, despite Tambs' historical opposition to the Canal Treaties, as ambassador to Panama.⁶³⁰ Curtin Winsor, ambassador to Costa Rica before Tambs and an admirer of Helms' policy positions, described Tambs as 'one of Jesse Helms' boys.'⁶³¹

Tambs had lost none of his enthusiasm for the rollback of communism since helping to author the Santa Fe Document, and had enjoyed influence in policymaking in the first years of the Reagan administration as a member of the National Security Council staff, alongside fellow Santa Fe veteran Roger Fontaine.⁶³² While serving at the NSC, he continued to act as

⁶²⁹ Curtin Winsor, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 29 February, 1988, *ADST*. See also M. Stanton Evans, "Shultz Shoots the Wounded At State Dep't," *Human Events*, 26 January, 1985, 9, "State Department Shakeup Alarms Conservatives," *Human Events*, 29 December, 1984, 3, John M. Goshko and Lou Cannon, "Conservatives Suspicious of Shultz Purge," *Washington Post*, 23 December, 1984, A1.

⁶³⁰ Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 308, Michael Getler, "Clark Curbs Administration Turf Struggles," *Washington Post*, 17 May, 1982, A9, and Edward Walsh, "Some Key Reagan Foreign Policy Aides Remain in Bureaucratic Twilight Zone," *Washington Post*, 14 April, 1981, A3

⁶³¹ Curtin Winsor, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 29 February, 1988, *ADST*.

⁶³² Hepple, "Lewis Tambs," 12-15. Tambs' outlook is also noted in interviews with former Department of State personnel. See Charles Anthony Gillespie Jr., interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 19 September, 1995, *ADST*.

a beacon for conservatives who saw Central American instability through an East-West framework, earning the praise of Barry Goldwater for such analysis.⁶³³ As ambassador in Colombia, from May 1983 to February 1985, Tambs delighted Helms with his aggressive and interventionist leadership of anti-drugs programmes. The senator praised Tambs for helping orchestrate what he described as ‘the world’s biggest drug bust’, in which Colombian forces, accompanied by a U.S. Embassy observer, seized almost 14 tonnes of cocaine worth \$1.2 billion.⁶³⁴ Critics, however, were less impressed by Tambs’ unorthodox methods, which they felt intensified the threat to American officials working in Colombia.⁶³⁵ Among the more controversial elements of Tambs’ approach was his invention of the term ‘narcoguerrilla’, which, while popular with conservatives looking to further chastise the immorality of communist rebels, insulted Colombian traditions that saw counterrevolutionaries as idealistic – even romantic – figures of heroism.⁶³⁶

Nicaragua was never off the radar though. The ambassador kept in touch with another acquaintance from the anti-Sandinista network, Oliver North, who, like members of Helms’ staff, shared a commitment to

⁶³³ Barry Goldwater (AZ), “Concerns For Central America,” *Cong. Rec.* 128 (1982), 2511.

⁶³⁴ Jesse Helms (NC), “The Achievement of Ambassador Tambs,” *Cong. Rec.* 130 (1984), 6157, and “World’s largest drug bust made in Colombia jungles,” *Chicago Tribune*, 21 March, 1984, d5.

⁶³⁵ J. Phillip Mclean, who served as deputy director and director of Andean Affairs at the State Department, remembered Tambs’ strategy required extra security precautions for the ambassador. Tambs himself travelled with personal firearms: “I must say it made me a little bit nervous”, Mclean recalled. J. Phillip Mclean, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 11 January, 1999, *ADST*.

⁶³⁶ For more on Tambs’ use of the term ‘narcoguerrilla’, see Merrill Collett, “The Myth of the ‘Narco-Guerrillas,” *The Nation*, 13 August, 1988, 1. See also J. Phillip Mclean, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 11 January, 1999, *ADST*.

intensifying the southern front in the war in Nicaragua.⁶³⁷ In November 1985, Tambs was sent to Costa Rica as ambassador, ostensibly because of that nation's strategic value in the fight against communism.⁶³⁸ In fact, he was dispatched with the specific intention of opening a southern front, on the orders of both North and Elliot Abrams.⁶³⁹ The initiative was known to only a handful of pro-Contra Washington insiders, and was not authorised by Congress. It continued a pattern for Tambs, after he had previously acknowledged to his managers at the State Department that, while acknowledging their instructions, his activities in Colombia had been at the behest of White House officials.⁶⁴⁰

Political appointees were not viewed with overt suspicion by those running the State Department at the time. Ronald Spiers, who helped oversee personnel as Undersecretary of Management at the Department of State between 1983 and 1989, later argued 'a modicum of political appointees is good for the Foreign Service.'⁶⁴¹ Nor, of course, was it unusual for the administration, or indeed any administration, to use ideological allies within the ambassadorial system. Yet in the fragmented policy bureaucracy of the Reagan administration, where competing constellations of activists vied for influence, placing one of the most hard-line Contra

⁶³⁷ Oliver North, *Under Fire: An American Story* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1992), 302. Edward A. Lynch, a member of the administration's Office of Public Liaison, recalls a meeting at the American Security council in which a member of Helms' staff called on the attending Contra representative to increase their actions in southern Nicaragua. Lynch, *Cold War's Last Battlefield*, 223.

⁶³⁸ Jesse Helms (NC), "The Achievement of Ambassador Lew Tambs," *Cong. Rec.*133 (1987), 11994.

⁶³⁹ James L. Tull, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 15 June, 2001, *ADST*.

⁶⁴⁰ J. Phillip Mclean, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 11 January, 1999, *ADST*.

⁶⁴¹ Ronald I. Spiers, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 11 November, 1991, *ADST*.

advocates in such a significant post tilted the field toward the illegal operations then being run by North and his associates.

This was exacerbated by the mutually reinforcing nature of the anti-Sandinista community. Having Tambs in close proximity to Contra operations on the ground, operating among a community devoted to the Contras as the sole instrument of U.S. policy in Nicaragua, led to the formulation and implementation of policy initiatives that had no relation to other parts of the administration's strategy. James Tull, who served as Tambs' assistant in Costa Rica, believed that Tambs, North, Abrams, and CIA Central American task force director Allen Fiers were essentially implementing their own Contra agenda unilaterally.⁶⁴²

One of the most notable incidents that demonstrated the dangers of the network's multi-track policy involved Contra commander Eden Pastora. A leading Sandinista during the Revolution, Pastora rapidly grew disillusioned with the new government in Managua. After disavowing his former comrades, Pastora was contacted by the CIA's Latin America operations chief Duane "Dewey" Claridge. Claridge was convinced that the former Sandinista represented a different kind of Contra leader: charismatic, bold, and, crucially, one who enjoyed popular support in Nicaragua.⁶⁴³ Despite a positive start, the relationship between the U.S. and Pastora broke down. U.S. officials described him variously as 'singularly ineffective' and 'disorganized and unstable'.⁶⁴⁴ In 1984, after Pastora refused to ally with the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), assistance to his faction was terminated.⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴² James L. Tull, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 15 June, 2001, *ADST*.

⁶⁴³ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 295.

⁶⁴⁴ Curtin Winsor, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 29 February, 1988, *ADST*, and Pardo-Maurer, *The Contras*, 20.

⁶⁴⁵ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 465.

Though other members of the anti-Sandinista network were relieved to be rid of Pastora, Helms was outraged. The senator was a leading supporter of Pastora and had developed a close relationship with him, going as far as to label the Nicaraguan 'the one authentic folk hero of the revolution'.⁶⁴⁶ Pastora contacted Helms in 1985 to ask for assistance in regaining U.S. support, and both the senator and his aide Deborah DeMoss subsequently met with the guerrilla leader. The following year, in March 1986, General John Singlaub (ret.), a close acquaintance of Helms and founder of the U.S. chapter of the World Anticommunist League, travelled to Central America to meet with Pastora.⁶⁴⁷ Singlaub was an active member of the anti-Sandinista network and a leading private fundraiser for the rebels, having been dismissed from his command by President Carter for publicly criticising the president's Korea policy in 1977.⁶⁴⁸

While DeMoss denied that Helms or his office had urged Singlaub to visit Pastora, Tambs claimed the general was Helms' envoy.⁶⁴⁹ There was no direct link between the senator and the substance of Singlaub's visit, but good news followed for Helms when, after meeting with the retired general, Pastora agreed to cooperate with the FDN in return for a resumption in assistance.⁶⁵⁰ The accord essentially altered official U.S. policy towards the Contras by re-engaging with the previously discredited Pastora. Tambs denied allegations from the State Department that he had authorised this unsanctioned deal, reporting to his superiors that neither he, nor any

⁶⁴⁶ Jesse Helms (NC), "The Nicaraguan Resistance: Is It Being Sold Down The River?" *Cong. Rec.* 131 (1985), 6641.

⁶⁴⁷ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 333 – 334.

⁶⁴⁸ "Gen. Singlaub forced to retire after criticizing Carter," *Chicago Tribune*, 29 April, 1978, 2, and Storer Rowley, "Private funds fuel contras' fight," *Chicago Tribune*, 9 September, 1985, 12.

⁶⁴⁹ Pastora/Singlaub Agreement, Top Secret, Cable San Jose, 26 March, 1986, *DNSA*.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

member of his embassy, was linked in any way to the agreement.⁶⁵¹ Nevertheless, Secretary of State George Shultz ordered Tambs to disavow the agreement out of fears it could embarrass the U.S. government. The ambassador was told to notify Pastora that the arrangement was void.⁶⁵²

Nevertheless, the episode *was* a short-lived embarrassment for the U.S., and threatened to undermine attempts to forge a unified Contra movement. Tambs, despite his close association with Helms, was suspicious of Pastora, and believed the senator's support for the guerrilla damaged the overall Contra strategy.⁶⁵³ Yet it is hard to disagree with the State Department's finding that Tambs' involvement in the deal – particularly his decision to transmit the agreement to Washington – represented 'an unwarranted stamp of official approval.'⁶⁵⁴ Not only did it further fragment Contra policy, it also reinforced the belief among observers that Tambs' independent streak made him unsuitable for such a senior position.⁶⁵⁵ Even Winsor believed Tambs lacked political courage, and noted that because of

⁶⁵¹ Pastora-Singlaub Agreement, [Lewis Tambs' Response to John Whitehead Criticism about Eden Pastora-John Singlaub Arms Deal], Secret, Cable San Jose, 31 March, 1986, *DNSA*.

⁶⁵² Pastora-Singlaub Agreement, [George Schultz Instructions to Inform Eden Pastora that John Singlaub is Not an Authorized Negotiator for the U.S.], Secret, Cable State, 9 April, 1986, *DNSA*.

⁶⁵³ Tambs registered his hope that when Singlaub reported back to the senator, 'Helms may re-evaluate his position regarding Pastora.' Pastora/Singlaub Agreement, Top Secret, Cable San Jose, 26 March, 1986, *DNSA*.

⁶⁵⁴ Agreement, Top Secret, Cable San Jose, 26 March, 1986, *DNSA*. John Whitehead, Deputy Secretary of State, registered his disappointment in Tambs' actions. Pastora-Singlaub Agreement, [State Department Condemnation of Lewis Tambs' Role in John Singlaub Agreement to Arm Eden Pastora's Contras], Secret, Cable State, 29 March, 1986, *DNSA*.

⁶⁵⁵ Richard Melton, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 27 January, 1997, *ADST*.

Tambs' actions, Contra policy suffered 'much deeper trouble than it should have'.⁶⁵⁶

This confused affair, which involved a multitude of foreign governments and private individuals working alongside, and often in tension with, U.S. government actors, was symptomatic of the wider Iran-Contra scandal that was soon to hit the headlines.⁶⁵⁷ It also raised controversy around the Contra programme at precisely the time Congress was gearing up for battle over Reagan's \$100 million lethal aid request for 1986. Only the week before, the president's annual funding proposal had been defeated after the administration withdrew from its cautious alliance with Rep. Dave McCurdy (D-OK) and his bloc of Contra swing votes.⁶⁵⁸ On top of this damaging blow to Contra policy, additional negative coverage created by the Pastora episode could have dealt the Reagan Doctrine a serious blow.

As it was, the embarrassment was cut short by a Sandinista incursion into Honduras on the day of the House vote. Though Sandinista attacks on Contra camps inside its neighbour's territory were nothing new, the White House saw an opportunity to generate additional support for its Nicaragua policy. Under intense pressure from administration officials, Honduras played up the incident, and enough Democrats were discouraged by the apparent Sandinista aggression to pass the president's \$100 million aid request.⁶⁵⁹ Helms declared before the Senate that the Sandinistas, 'under Cuban and Soviet supervision, have arrogantly invaded Honduras' and

⁶⁵⁶ Curtin Winsor, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 29 February, 1988, *ADST*.

⁶⁵⁷ U.S. Senate, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair with Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views*, S. Rpt. No. 100-216, 100th Cong., 1st sess., 378.

⁶⁵⁸ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 457.

⁶⁵⁹ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 457-462, and Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, 432-435.

Contra 'blood is still flowing as we talk.' When the upper chamber voted on the aid bill on 27 March, the anti-Sandinista network won a surprising victory, 53-47.⁶⁶⁰

During his floor speech, Helms ratcheted up the pressure by attacking opponents of Contra aid as weak and saying they would be responsible should Central America fall to communism. It was a strategy that conservatives in the White House had been advocating from the start of the year, with Pat Buchanan telling Reagan's chief of staff in January that the administration must 'admonish Congress either to give the White House the military assistance needed for the Freedom Fighters and the Central American allies to prevail, or take full responsibility for the loss of Central America to the Soviet Union.'⁶⁶¹ The senator's statement that the vote would 'let us see who stands where with respect to protecting the American people from the inevitable if Central America is allowed to fall as the latest victim into the hands of the Communists' was in perfect harmony with Buchanan's public relations strategy, and provided congressional support for the administration's aggressive pro-Contra campaign.⁶⁶²

Meanwhile, Helms pressed the principled conservative Contra agenda by introducing his own funding proposal to authorise Reagan's original 1985 aid programme – military aid dispensed by the CIA – unless the Sandinistas met a series of conditions, including the withdrawal of Soviet and Cuban forces, cessation of subversive activities in neighbouring countries, adherence to promises made to the OAS and Contadora groups, and free elections as soon as possible.⁶⁶³

⁶⁶⁰ Jesse Helms (NC), "Aid To Contras," *Cong. Rec.* 132 (1986), 6290, and "Rollcall Vote No. 51 Leg.," *Cong. Rec.* 132 (1986), 6520.

⁶⁶¹ Memo, Pat Buchanan to Donald Regan, 9 January, 1986, ID364321, CO114 Box 140 WHORM: Subject File, *RRL*.

⁶⁶² Helms, "Aid To Contras," *Cong. Rec.* 132 (1986), 6290.

⁶⁶³ Jesse Helms (NC), "Aid To Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance," *Cong. Rec.* 132 (1986), 6404.

Amid a bipartisan effort to find a compromise that would provide a strong show of support for Reagan's policy, the proposal – which made no attempt to link the aid to on-going negotiations – was too provocative to be viable.⁶⁶⁴ It was rejected 39-60, but served as a reminder of Helms' commitment to a more robust Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua.⁶⁶⁵ It also helped to sustain the conservative argument that, while the Contras were suffering without U.S. assistance, they could win the war if Congress provided the necessary military aid.⁶⁶⁶ When Helms asked his colleagues 'What happens if the conditions are right for a sweeping forward movement?', the implicit suggestion was that with the right aid, the Contras could make significant military gains against the Sandinistas.⁶⁶⁷

Helms also promoted executive supremacy in the foreign policy process. He told Senate colleagues that 'we do not have the power to make foreign policy', and though 'It would be perfectly proper for Congress to say what we think should be done... we have no constitutional authority to say what shall be done under the President's authority to conduct foreign relations.' His amendment, Helms argued, supported Reagan's position: 'The question then is whether we go all out to support the President, or whether we hobble his actions to support freedom in Central America.'⁶⁶⁸

⁶⁶⁴ Dorothy Collin, "Senate leaders seek deal on contras," *Chicago Tribune*, 26 March, 1986, 12, Steven V. Roberts, "Party Chiefs Seek 'Common Ground' On Contras," *The New York Times*, 25 March, 1986, A18, and Milton Coleman and Lou Cannon, "Contra Bill Compromise Sought," *Washington Post*, 25 March, 1986, A9.

⁶⁶⁵ "Rollcall Vote No. 47 Leg.," *Cong. Rec.* 132 (1986), 6407.

⁶⁶⁶ "The Contras *Can* Win," *Human Events*, 22 March, 1986, 1, and Patrick J. Buchanan, "The Contras Need Our Help," *Washington Post*, 5 March, 1986, A19.

⁶⁶⁷ Helms, "Aid To Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance," *Cong. Rec.* 132 (1986), 6405.

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 6405.

Of course Helms' commitment to defending Reagan's authority reflected his faith in the administration's strategy at this point. As was the case throughout his involvement in Central America across the period, there was often a direct relationship between the senator's advocacy of the executive branch's constitutional prerogatives and the extent to which the White House followed a path acceptable to Helms. In this case, with the Reagan administration launching an intensive campaign at the start of 1986 on behalf of the Contras at the behest of ardent anti-Sandinistas in the White House, and buoyed by the conservative policies being promoted by the new national security adviser, John Poindexter, the senator appeared at ease with the Executive.⁶⁶⁹

There was great success for the administration again, in August, when the Senate agreed to Reagan's new request for \$100 million in Contra aid. The celebrations, however, were short-lived. On 3 November, the Lebanese magazine *Ash-Shiraa* published an article describing how the administration had negotiated with Iran to provide that country with weapons in exchange for the release of several American hostages held by the Iranian-backed Hezbollah group. On 22 November, while investigating the magazine's claims, Attorney General Ed Meese discovered documents implicating Oliver North and several colleagues in the transfer of residual funds from the Iran weapons deal to the Contras. Three days later, President Reagan told Americans that he was 'deeply troubled' by the 'seriously flawed' implementation of his policy to free the hostages, and promised an investigation.⁶⁷⁰ The Iran-Contra scandal had begun.

⁶⁶⁹ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 445-446, and Letter, Senator Jesse Helms to John Poindexter, 30 April, 1986, ID414989, FG006-12, WHORM: Subject File, *RRL*.

⁶⁷⁰ "Remarks Announcing the Review of the National Security Council's Role in the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy, 25 November, 1986," *The Public Papers of Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Library, accessed 7 January, 2014, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/112586a.htm>.

The Iran-Contra Scandal, 1986-1988

The Iran-Contra affair would become the largest single foreign policy scandal Reagan would face as president. Over the next year, as various investigations into the matter took their course, Helms resolutely defended Reagan, seeking to insulate the president from criticism as his approval rating began to collapse.⁶⁷¹ He also maintained a consistent defence of the Contra programme, and defended those implicated in the scandal as patriots seeking to implement the president's national security policies in the face of media misrepresentation and congressional resistance. Finally, he sought to minimise the scope and resonance of investigations into the scandal and the potential legal consequences for those implicated. As Helms' aide Clint Fuller told the White House in a 12 December letter, before the facts of the case had been established, 'we're on your side. Keep up the good works.'⁶⁷²

Helms' defence of the president began in December, when his office distributed a pro-forma letter to those who had contacted the senator about the scandal. Noting the large amount of correspondence about the affair, the senator opened with a plea for restraint:

My own feeling, based on a fair amount of experience in this city - - and a close-range observation of how the major news media operate - - leads me to the conclusion that the country would be best served if (1) voices could be lowered a bit, and (2) all of us would wait to see precisely how the facts develop.

⁶⁷¹ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 484.

⁶⁷² Letter, Clint Fuller to Pat, 12 December, 1986, folder "Helms, Jesse A. (18)," WHORM: Alpha File, *RRL*.

Bearing this in mind, the senator added, Americans should remember the successes of Reagan's presidency. 'His administration has raised the prestige, security and independence of the United States', the senator wrote, 'a fact that his media critics refuse to acknowledge.' Moreover, in defending the Monroe Doctrine - 'which has not been repudiated, and therefore stands as a firm policy for this nation and its President' - and with 'constant roadblocks thrown in his path by Congress and the major news media' the president 'has done his best to keep communism off our door-step, and restore freedom in Nicaragua.'⁶⁷³

A week later, Helms repeated the argument to the *Raleigh Times*. 'I find myself wishing that the major news media had half the integrity and forthrightness of the President,' he wrote to the editor, 'not to mention his dedication to restoring and preserving freedom in the world.' Awaiting the facts of the case was more prudent than 'engaging in a cacophony of speculations, innuendo and criticism' of Reagan, and it was fortunate that:

the American people have not elected any editor to enforce the Monroe Doctrine in Latin America - - or, for that matter, to try to achieve a measure of stability in the complicated Persian Gulf and Middle East situations. Ronald Reagan presently is alone in bearing that responsibility.'⁶⁷⁴

Within a month, on the first day of the new Congress, Helms further attacked the 'innuendo, misrepresentation, [and] flatout [sic] falsehoods'

⁶⁷³ Letter, Senator Jesse Helms, 12 December, 1986, folder "Helms, Jesse A. (18)," WHORM: Alpha File, RRL.

⁶⁷⁴ In a handwritten annotation on the copy sent to Pat Buchanan, Helms told his conservative friend that 'I like to have fun with editors like this!' Letter, Senator Jesse Helms to Editor, the *Raleigh Times*, 17 December, 1986, "Helms, Jesse A. (18)," WHORM: Alpha File, RRL.

levelled at the president, lamenting that ‘nobody is willing to stand up and say this President is not guilty of that.’⁶⁷⁵

That Helms moved quickly to defend the president and his policies was in sharp contrast to the majority of Republicans. Most proved unwilling in the aftermath of the scandal to defend the Contra programme or sale of weapons to Iran, both of which were publicly unpopular and appeared to yield little political benefit given that Reagan would not be running for re-election in 1988.⁶⁷⁶ Yet Helms’ reaction was part of a wider effort by movement conservatives to sustain both Contra aid and Reagan’s foreign policies more generally. As one White House insider put it, “‘They’re [Democrats] going to stick it hard to Republicans on Iran, I can feel it’”, with *National Review* concluding that ‘at an appropriate time, they’ll attack.’⁶⁷⁷ Pat Buchanan savaged the media and congressional Democrats for the ‘feeding frenzy’ and, with one eye on Ted Kennedy, declared that the Democrats would ‘not succeed in leaving another band of patriots like the Contras on the beaches of another Bay of Pigs.’⁶⁷⁸ Mistakes should be punished, Rep. Jack Kemp (R-NY) accepted, but ‘it is not the policies that must be sacrificed.’⁶⁷⁹

Helms’ fears, and those of conservatives in general, should be seen within the context of November’s mid-term elections, when Democrats took control of the Senate and maintained their majority in the House. This shocked the White House, who seemed unprepared for the eventuality.⁶⁸⁰

⁶⁷⁵ Jesse Helms (NC), “Select Committee On Iran And Nicaragua,” *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 280.

⁶⁷⁶ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 484.

⁶⁷⁷ “Letter From Washington,” *National Review*, 5 December, 1986, 15.

⁶⁷⁸ “Conservatives Strongly Defend Embattled President,” *Human Events*, 20 December, 1986, 17.

⁶⁷⁹ “Conservatives Strongly Defend Embattled President,” 1.

⁶⁸⁰ “Letter From Washington,” *National Review*, 5 December, 1986, 15.

Grassroots conservatives urged Republicans to fight back and ‘quit acting like scared rabbits’, conscious of the fact that, as a front-page article in *Human Events* noted, ‘the Democratic-controlled Congress has the assistance program within its lethal sights.’⁶⁸¹

To reduce the impact of Iran-Contra, when the new legislative session began on 6 January, 1987, Helms quickly sought to reduce both the scope and resonance of the investigations. As the Senate considered creating its own investigative body into the incident, Helms told his colleagues that a Senate Select Committee on Iran and Nicaragua would be redundant, too costly, and bad legislation. ‘I just do not feel that another investigation, duplicating effort, going back over the same treadmill, is worth it’, Helms told his colleagues, before arguing that ‘we ought to get on with trying to balance the budget and some of the others problems facing this Nation.’⁶⁸²

Certainly Congress was, at the start of 1987, facing the prospect of an acrimonious budget battle with the administration, and Helms’ comments came on the day Reagan announced his 1988 budget.⁶⁸³ The conservative movement had been vocally committed to a balanced budget, or at least greater fiscal responsibility, and Helms’ appeal took advantage of these right-wing talking points to divert attention from Iran-Contra.⁶⁸⁴ Yet the

⁶⁸¹ “Conservative Forum,” *Human Events*, 10 January, 1989, 19, and “New Strategy Needed To Win in Nicaragua,” *Human Events*, 3 January, 1987, 1.

⁶⁸² Jesse Helms (NC), “Select Committee On Iran And Nicaragua,” *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 281.

⁶⁸³ Robert Pear, “Reagan Sends \$1 Trillion Budget To Congress, and Battle Is Joined,” *The New York Times*, 6 January, 1987, and William Neikirk, “1st trillion dollar U.S. budget,” *Chicago Tribune*, 6 January, 1987.

⁶⁸⁴ For examples, see William F. Buckley, Jr., “The Big D,” *National Review*, 13 February, 1987, 60, and William F. Buckley, Jr., “Managing The Deficit,” *National Review*, 13 February, 1987, 60-61, Robert K. Dornan, “Congress Continually Guilty of Budgetary Crimes,” *Human Events*, 10 January, 1987, 9, and Donald Lambro, “Fiscal Sanity First, Pay Rises Later,” *Human Events*, 3 January, 1987, 4.

senator was almost certainly using the budget as a prop. As Helms stated, 'To string this thing out even to August is totally irresponsible as far as I am concerned'.⁶⁸⁵ Helms wanted a quick and definitive acknowledgement of the president's innocence, not a prolonged congressional examination that would maintain damaging headlines throughout the rest of the year.⁶⁸⁶ Helms badly misjudged Senate sentiment, however. When the vote was called, only senators Chic Hecht (R-NV), Gordon Humphrey (R-NH), and Ernest Hollings (D-SC) joined him in opposing the resolution.⁶⁸⁷

Conservatives latched on to the Tower Commission's review of the scandal, published in February, which concluded that Reagan had not sought to mislead the public or cover up any illegal actions.⁶⁸⁸ Indeed, conservatives began arguing that the report had exonerated the administration entirely, ignoring the report's equally damaging account of a president unable to manage his own staff.⁶⁸⁹ At this critical moment, with debate over the report's analysis swirling and with less than two weeks to go before Congress voted on the remaining \$40 million of the 1986 funding package, Helms joined several Senate conservatives in requesting that the White House authorise the delivery of 'high-quality U.S. weapons' to the rebels: Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, as well as TOW and Dragon anti-tank weapons. He claimed that should such weapons be successful in destroying

⁶⁸⁵ Helms, "Select Committee On Iran And Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 280.

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 280.

⁶⁸⁷ "Rollcall Vote No. 1 Leg.," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 296.

⁶⁸⁸ John Tower, Edmund Muskie, and Brent Scowcroft, *The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the President's Special Review Board* (New York: Bantam Books; Times Books, 1987), 84.

⁶⁸⁹ M. Stanton Evans, "Tower Report Supports The Reagan Version," *Human Events*, 21 March, 1987, 8.

Soviet helicopters operating in Nicaragua, momentum would build for further support.⁶⁹⁰

The request suggested that the senator envisioned the successful ‘Afghanisation’ of battlefield tactics in Nicaragua, even amidst the uncertainty caused by Iran-Contra. The Stinger missile, introduced to mujahedeen forces in late 1986, was credited with altering the balance of power in Afghanistan in a series of media reports through December 1986 and spring 1987.⁶⁹¹ Conservatives celebrated this news, and though scholars have debated the overall effectiveness and consequences of Stinger systems in Afghanistan, Helms’ desire to see such weapons used in Nicaragua suggested his faith for a repeat performance.⁶⁹²

As Chester Pach notes, the deployment of Stingers was a critical moment in the evolution of the Reagan Doctrine in Afghanistan. It was one of the first steps in the implementation of NSDD-166, Reagan’s decision in March 1985 to formally define a Soviet loss in Afghanistan as a specific objective of United States policy in that country.⁶⁹³ By seeking a similar strategy in Nicaragua, Helms looked to model Contra policy, and thus the Reagan Doctrine in Central America, in the shape of the even more highly

⁶⁹⁰ Letter, Senators Jesse Helms, Steve Symms, Mitch McConnell, Malcolm Wallop, and Chic Hecht to President Reagan, 6 March, 1987, ID465682, FG013, WHORM: Subject File, RRL.

⁶⁹¹ Richard M. Weintraub, “Afghans Use U.S. Missiles,” *Washington Post*, 27 January, 1987, A1, David B. Ottaway, “Big Losses Of Soviet Planes Cited,” *Washington Post*, 17 December, 1986, A32, and Bernard Gwertzman, “Stingers Aiding Afghans’ Fight, U.S. Aides Say,” *The New York Times*, 13 December, 1986, 1.

⁶⁹² “Conservative Forum,” *Human Events*, 3 January, 1987, 19. Alan J. Kuperman, in an overview of the missiles’ use in Afghanistan, agreed that it had ‘an immediate military impact’ but that immediate reports of its success may still have been ‘somewhat overblown.’ Alan J. Kuperman, “The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan,” *Political Science Quarterly* 114, No. 2 (Summer, 1999), 244.

⁶⁹³ Pach, “The Reagan Doctrine,” 82.

militarised conflict in Asia. Helms' strategy suggested that movement conservatives looked critically on the inconsistencies with which the Reagan Doctrine was applied around the world. Instead of adapting the general principles of the doctrine to each case, Helms wanted a one-size-fits-all strategy that, irrespective of local tactical considerations, would provide the maximum level of assistance to indigenous anti-communists.

The White House had a different vision. The administration, having already upgraded the Contras' air-defence capabilities, rejected the senator's proposals, noting that current strategic assessments did not support the need for such weapons.⁶⁹⁴ Despite his defence of the administration over the previous four months, Helms' efforts to intensify the conflict in Nicaragua did not appeal to a White House dealing with the ramifications of Iran-Contra.

Helms' request for greater firepower was even more strongly at odds with congressional sentiment, where the consequences of Iran-Contra manifested themselves in the heated debate and close vote over S. J. Res 81, "Disapproval Of Certain Assistance To The Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance". The first test of Nicaraguan policy in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra revelations, the outcome of the vote was irrelevant to the authorisation of assistance because Reagan would veto the resolution should it pass in Congress. It nevertheless represented a 'bellwether', as LeoGrande puts it, for subsequent votes on the administration's 1987 aid request.⁶⁹⁵ As Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) noted, it became 'a referendum on the goals and tactics of administration policy in Central America.'⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁹⁴ Letter, J. Edward Fox to Senator Jesse Helms, 28 April, 1987, ID465682, FG013, WHORM: Subject File, *RRL*.

⁶⁹⁵ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 485.

⁶⁹⁶ Tom Harkin (IA), "Disapproval Of Certain Assistance To The Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 6050.

Democrats in the House sought to make the vote a judgement on the administration's tactics and corruption within the Contra movement, and the chamber voted on an altered resolution that sought a six month moratorium on Contra aid while a full accounting process was completed.⁶⁹⁷ However, Helms, operating in the Senate where the rules limited matters to a simple yes-or-no vote on the package, used the debate to chastise opponents of the president. Helms' opening argument on 17 March summarised his case: 'If the flickering light of freedom goes out in this hemisphere in our own front yard in Central America, it will have been blown out not in Nicaragua but in Washington, D.C., and specifically in the Congress of the United States.'⁶⁹⁸

Helms continued to use the Monroe Doctrine as an explicit justification for the Contra programme, although his interpretation by now bore little resemblance to its original form, or even its Rooseveltian adaptation. It might be 1987, he concluded in a rebuke of one colleague who had denied the doctrine's contemporary relevance, but 'insofar as I know, the Monroe Doctrine has not been withdrawn as national policy of this country, and I pray that it never will be.' The doctrine 'was sound when it was enunciated and it is sound today', he added, concluding that 'we will ignore it at our peril.'⁶⁹⁹ On the day of the vote, Helms repeated his warning: 'If we abandon the Monroe Doctrine, then we are inviting a takeover of this hemisphere by the Soviet Union.'⁷⁰⁰

That conservatives saw Iran-Contra as a means of reinvigorating the debate over the Monroe Doctrine was made clear in William Buckley's later

⁶⁹⁷ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 485-487.

⁶⁹⁸ Jesse Helms (NC), "Disapproval Of Certain Assistance To The Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 5892-5893.

⁶⁹⁹ Helms, "Disapproval Of Certain Assistance To The Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 6084.

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 6460.

suggestion that Oliver North run for the Senate on a platform of reaffirming the doctrine.⁷⁰¹ Yet, as Gaddis Smith points out, the secrecy of North's operations had actually removed the last elements of President Monroe's original appeal for 'candor' between interested parties in the hemisphere.⁷⁰² Thus, Helms' continued insistence on the relevance of the doctrine, rooted in its nineteenth century context yet unconscious of the destruction of one of its most important principles, underlined the senator's (and the conservative movement's) re-issuing of the doctrine with specific Cold War purposes in mind.

Helms' fears for the long-term future of the Contra programme were evident in the escalation of his rhetoric in the March debates. 'There is no more time to debate this issue', he told his colleagues. 'As the U.S. Congress coolly sits back debating inane arguments, the Soviet Union is protecting its investment.'⁷⁰³ 'Nicaragua is already a Soviet base. I hope Senators will wake up and smell the coffee.'⁷⁰⁴ Helms' allusions to the mass migration of refugees was intensified, supporting a White House that had recently reaffirmed the topic as a critical talking point for building support for Nicaragua policy.⁷⁰⁵ As previously noted (see page 142), Helms no longer limited it to the 25 million of previous years, and instead identified 100 million people between Panama and Texas who, in 'an absolute probability ... will walk north':

⁷⁰¹ William F. Buckley, Jr., "Next Step For North?" *National Review*, 14 August, 1987, 55.

⁷⁰² Smith, *Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine*, 201.

⁷⁰³ Helms, "Disapproval Of Certain Assistance To The Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 6085.

⁷⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 5893.

⁷⁰⁵ Action Plan, Charlie Wick to Frank C. Carlucci, 9 March, 1987, ID464580, CO114, WHORM: Subject File, *RRL*.

They will come into our country, seeking and yearning for freedom – people who cannot speak English, who have no jobs or home, or anything else except that yearning for freedom. They will go on welfare, they will impact upon our schools and other institutions.⁷⁰⁶

Further pessimism could be detected in explicit references to American casualties. Helms promised that American lives would be lost should Congress abandon the Contras. ‘We must send American dollars now, or spill American blood later’, he concluded before the vote, receiving praise from Senator Phil Gramm for doing so.⁷⁰⁷ Steve Symms took up the same point, noting that ‘Either we aid the Contras now, or we do the job later with our own soldiers.’⁷⁰⁸ Only three days after the vote, *Human Events* demanded a ‘bold and imaginative course of action’ from Reagan, arguing that the president:

can no longer say, as he has in the past, that U.S. soldiers will never be committed to combat. He has to say that it is quite likely that they will be, unless the Contras can get the wherewithal over a long period of time to do it on their own.⁷⁰⁹

Taken together, the comments suggested the anti-Sandinista network was fearful of the prospects for Contra aid during the coming year and willing to use the previously taboo topic of American casualties as rhetorical leverage for gaining congressional and public support for the rebels.

⁷⁰⁶ Helms, “Disapproval Of Certain Assistance To The Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance,” *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 6084.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid., 6086, and Phil Gramm (TX), “Disapproval of Certain Assistance To The Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance,” *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 6086.

⁷⁰⁸ Steve Symms (ID), “Disapproval Of Certain Assistance To The Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance,” *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 6458.

⁷⁰⁹ “Bold New Program Needed To Oust Sandinistas,” *Human Events*, 21 March, 1987, 19.

S. J. Res. 81 was rejected in the Senate, 52-48. Helms voted against the resolution, but it is hard to measure the impact of his rhetoric.⁷¹⁰ Despite Democratic gains, the 1986 elections produced only a two-vote swing against Contra aid in the upper chamber.⁷¹¹ It was not enough to sustain the resolution of disapproval. Helms saved his most notorious attempt to influence the course of the Iran-Contra scandal until late in the year. On 5 November, he triggered Senate outrage when he sought to intervene over possible indictments of North and others being investigated. He had already expressed concern at the potential public distribution of Congress' Iran-Contra report. 'Well, I am not certain about that', Helms told Warren Rudman (R-NH), who had proposed a widespread distribution of the report in order to aid public understanding. 'Maybe the people of this country would rather have the money saved.' Earlier, Helms had also opposed mass mailings of the report by members of Congress, again citing cost. In both cases, as with his plea in January that senators consider the cost of additional investigative bodies, Helms used fiscal responsibility as a fig leaf for limiting the fallout of the scandal.⁷¹²

Helms argued that limiting prosecutions best served the nation's security, and that the U.S. Code's section 594 specifically allowed for prosecutorial discretion in such a case. He urged the Senate to go on record 'against a further drawing out, extension of the Iran-Contra affair that will service absolutely no purpose except to aid those governments around the world which are unfriendly to the United States, chiefly the Soviet Union and Iran.'⁷¹³ Helms also positioned himself as a champion of populist sentiment. 'I have had many requests to offer this amendment', he claimed.

⁷¹⁰ "Rollcall Vote No. 31 Leg.," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 6091.

⁷¹¹ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 487.

⁷¹² Jesse Helms (NC), "Printing Of Reports," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 31090-31092.

⁷¹³ Helms, "Printing Of Reports," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 31093-31096.

'Not a one of them coming from anybody in Government. The requests have come from the American people, obviously, especially from North Carolina, who have had their own reaction to the events of the past several months.' Helms saw a public 'tired of hauling military officers and others before various tribunals asking them about everything ranging from their NFL preferences to where they keep their paperclips.' As a critique of the public hearings into Iran-Contra, it continued a conservative narrative that the previous summer's events 'had little to do with factfinding', as the Republican minority report argued, but had been a vehicle for a 'sycophantic' and 'arrogant' Congress, out of touch with the American people, to criticise North and others involved.⁷¹⁴

Finally, Helms argued that North and his co-accused had been unfairly victimised for their patriotic actions, and should be left alone. 'I do not think Ollie North should be indicted', the senator stated bluntly. Observers were perhaps reminded of Richard Nixon's infamous 1962 "last press conference" when Helms said 'I do not think he [North] ought to be pushed around any more.' There was 'little question... that they were trying to serve their country', and their actions had been undertaken with 'honorable' intentions. 'I just feel strongly that Ollie North and others have been put through the wringer enough; particularly when it is fairly well and broadly acknowledged that they were doing what they thought was good for the country. Even if it turns out it may not have been good.'⁷¹⁵

⁷¹⁴ U.S. Senate, *Report of the Congressional Committee Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*, 438, and "Exeunt Omnes," *National Review*, 28, August, 1987, 14. Further examples of this narrative can be seen in Patrick J. Buchanan, "Will Reagan Make a Comeback – Or Be a Lame Duck?" *Human Events*, 15 August, 1987, 17, "Letter From Washington," *National Review*, 14 August, 1987, 14, William A. Rusher, "The Real Difference Between Ollie North and His Detractors," *Human Events*, 8 August, 1987, 18, "North Hearings Show Inouye at His Worst," *Human Events*, 25 July, 1987, 3, and John Chamberlain, "Private Donors Now Subject to Congressional Insult," *Human Events*, 11 July, 1987, 12.

⁷¹⁵ Helms, "Printing Of Reports," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 31096.

This talk bolstered an Oliver North lobby, which had emerged among conservatives eager to defend both his actions and the Reagan Doctrine more generally. In the pages of right-wing periodicals, North was showered with praise for his courage, honour, and willingness to stand up to congressional posturing. Only weeks after Iran-Contra erupted, *Human Events* described him as a ‘full-fledged hero’ whose transgressions, whatever they might be, ‘are far outweighed by his Luke Skywalker achievements.’⁷¹⁶ After his testimony in the summer, North was proclaimed a ‘swashbuckling figure’, who ‘didn’t back off an inch’ under the intimidating questioning.⁷¹⁷

Perhaps more importantly, movement conservatives saw North’s testimony on behalf of the Contras as the most effective justification thus heard for the president’s Nicaragua policy. Stan Evans noted that North had ‘strongly defended the supposedly disgraceful Iran and Contra policy’, and with polls showing an increase in public support for Contra aid, ‘was able to do in six days of testimony what the rest of the Reagan Administration had not been able to accomplish in six years.’⁷¹⁸ Such commentary revealed signs of discontent among conservatives over the administration’s public outreach effort, as strict movement conservatives began to believe that Americans favoured the principled stance taken by North when it was clearly presented to them.

Helms’ efforts in 1989 to restore North’s military pension cemented his position as North stalwart, and earned him rave reviews from the wider

⁷¹⁶ “Oliver North Is A National Hero,” *Human Events*, 13 December, 1989, 4.

⁷¹⁷ “North Eloquently Defends Iran-Contra Policy,” *Human Events*, 18 July, 1987, 1.

⁷¹⁸ M. Stanton Evans, “Iran-Contra Hearings Show Media Alienation,” *Human Events*, 8 August, 1987, 8, and M. Stanton Evans, “The Policy Lessons of Ollie North,” *Human Events*, 25 July, 1987, 8.

conservative movement.⁷¹⁹ Even as late as 1997, the senator continued to work with conservative groups to defend North's reputation. Appearing alongside what Stan Evans referred to as an All-Star conservative line-up, Helms helped Freedom Alliance celebrate North's heroism at a July tribute to the former army officer. To great applause from the crowd, the senator related a story of how, during a meeting between himself and Reagan, the president had tapped Helms, pointed to North, and said, "There is an authentic American hero."⁷²⁰ Indeed, such was the apparent affection, when North ran for the Senate in 1994, Democrats and Republicans alike identified him as a potential successor to Helms as the voice of conservatism. "That's certainly what's motivating me", said one Democratic operative who mobilised against him. "If this guy gets the baton from Jesse Helms he's around for 30 years."⁷²¹

To opponents of Helms' amendment, North's reputation was irrelevant. Senator Rudman, a centrist Republican, noted that his criticism was 'not because I do not share some of the views of my friends from North Carolina about some of the witnesses'. Instead, Rudman condemned Helms for seeking to subvert due process: "The strength of this democracy is that none of us are above the law, even those who may break laws because they may think it is in the national interest."⁷²² Arlen Specter, another moderate

⁷¹⁹ "Senate Approves North Pension," *Human Events*, 18 November, 1989, 7, and "Helms Boxes in Liberals on North's Pension," *Human Events*, 19 August, 1989, 5.

⁷²⁰ Jesse Helms, "Oliver North Tribute," *Freedom Alliance*, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/OliverNo>, 8 July, 1997.

⁷²¹ Richard L. Berke, "Oliver North Finds Himself A Candidate Under Siege," *The New York Times*, 28 February, 1994, A12.

⁷²² Warren Rudman (NH), "Printing Of Reports Of The Senate And House Select Committees On Iran," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 31093.

Republican and former District Attorney of Philadelphia, told Helms that his amendment was ‘a statement far outside existing law.’⁷²³

Democrats expressed similar sentiments. George Mitchell (D-ME) considered it ‘highly inappropriate’ for the legislature to interfere with another branch of government, while John Kerry (D-MA) believed the amendment ‘would... give credence to the point of view expressed by some at the NSC that sometimes its [sic] alright to go above the law.’⁷²⁴ The combined weight of these counter-arguments was too strong, and, as with the senator’s efforts to reject a Senate investigation into Iran-Contra, his colleagues overwhelmingly lined up on the other side of the vote. Mirroring the meagre alliance he had formed in January, Helms found only three other supportive votes: senators Orrin Hatch, Chic Hecht, and Steve Symms.⁷²⁵ Conservatives might have considered North a hero, but few in Congress – or, indeed, outside Capitol Hill – were willing to join Helms in pressing for legislative interference within the judicial system on behalf of their man.

While the amendment had been swiftly and overwhelmingly rejected, Helms’ willingness to go on record favouring this action made it one of the most radical proposals he offered relating to Central America policy. Despite his protestations to the contrary, the resolution would have interfered with due process by placing the weight of Senate opinion on the independent counsel. As Rudman astutely noted in his rebuttal of Helms’ argument,

⁷²³ Arlen Specter, (PA), “Printing Of Reports Of The Senate And House Select Committees On Iran,” *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 31094-31095.

⁷²⁴ George Mitchell (ME), “Printing Of Reports Of The Senate And House Select Committees On Iran,” *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 31093, and John Kerry (MA), “Printing Of Reports Of The Senate And House Select Committees On Iran,” *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 31095-31096.

⁷²⁵ “Rollcall Vote No. 369 Leg.” *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 31097.

Although this is nonbinding, I know the Senator from North Carolina would not disagree with me that a sense-of-the-Senate resolution such as this has a certain force and power of its own. If it did not, the Senator from North Carolina would not waste the time of the body to introduce it.⁷²⁶

For an individual who had relied so heavily on the separation of powers during the Panama Canal Treaties debate and congressional discussion over Reagan's Central America policies, Helms' actions demonstrated an uncomfortable inconsistency, wherein the senator willingly placed ideology above the rule of law. It also served as a reminder that when conservatism was in power, the post-war right displayed a more executive-centric conception of foreign policy in Central America as compared with the previous decade when the prerogatives of the legislative branch had been lauded so as to restrict the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations (most noticeably, of course, over the Canal Treaties).

Such rigid commitment to ideology laid the foundations for the final collapse in support for the rebels. What had formerly been advantages now proved to be important factors in the decline of support for the Contras. Where once informal, often clandestine, relationships had allowed for the implementation of a rapid, flexible and covert policy, in the harsh glare of public exposure during the Iran-Contra scandal they proved to be costly. The public and the vast majority of Congress found such methods unpalatable, and the entirety of U.S. anti-Sandinista policy became associated with these secretive means. Furthermore, the ideological rigidity expressed by the group – whether in their legislative strategy or rhetorical framework for its policy – reduced their influence on a public and Congress

⁷²⁶ Rudman, "Printing Of Reports Of The Senate And House Select Committees On Iran," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 31093.

wearied by the sustained and acrimonious policy debates of the past eight years.

Helms and conservatives claimed that Nicaragua policy had been reaffirmed by the groundswell of public support for the Contras in the aftermath of North's testimony, but the reality was that politics had shifted against them. At home, pragmatic elements in the administration, led by the new White House Chief of Staff Howard Baker, wanted to avoid further battles with Congress over Contra aid and reconstruct Reagan's agenda by focusing on more popular policies, such as arms limitation negotiations with the Soviet Union. To achieve this, the White House proposed that Speaker Jim Wright and the president jointly announce a peace plan for Central America. The Wright-Reagan plan, announced on 5 August, called for a cease-fire, suspension of U.S. and Soviet aid to those fighting in Nicaragua, and national reconciliation.⁷²⁷

In Central America, the consequences of Iran-Contra were also significant. Fearful of possible recriminations over their Contra support, El Salvador and Honduras – the two nations most critical to the policy – subtly retreated from the war.⁷²⁸ This shift, alongside the peace plan proposed by Costa Rican president Oscar Arias at the start of the year, culminated with the five Central American republics agreeing on 7 August to the Esquipulas II peace accord. This was, in part, motivated by self-interest. Daniel Ortega, the prominent Sandinista who had won the country's presidential election in 1984, and José Napoleón Duarte were acutely aware that peace offered the prospect of self-preservation, while Honduran president Azcona feared being blamed for any collapse in the talks. As such, the Central American nations agreed to a plan similar to the Wright-Reagan agreement.⁷²⁹ Unlike

⁷²⁷ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 510-514, Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, 520-522, and Arnson, *Crossroads*, 220-221.

⁷²⁸ Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, 522.

⁷²⁹ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 514-515, and Arnson, *Crossroads*, 221.

the American document, however, Esquipulas II marginalised the Contras as a negotiating party by calling for their disbandment, and demanded no cessation of Soviet aid to Nicaragua.⁷³⁰

All this dismayed movement conservatives. Believing North's passionate defence of the Contra programme had energised the public in support of Nicaragua policy, the anti-Sandinista network suddenly found itself facing the prospect of a negotiated settlement. 'Why on earth did President Reagan offer that so-called "peace plan" for Central America last week?' *Human Events* lamented on a front-page article: 'What the White House doesn't understand is that it has traded away its high cards.' The article pointed to Helms, Bill Armstrong and Jack Kemp as believing Reagan had squandered the opportunity created by North's testimony.⁷³¹

Helms contributed to the chorus of conservative disapproval. The senator had long regarded the Central American peace process, in its various forms, as a deceptive and unwelcome intrusion upon United States' policies in Nicaragua. Now, he and five conservative Republican colleagues met with Reagan on the day the Wright-Reagan plan was signed to express their opinion that the president had been duped.⁷³² Later that day, Helms condemned the agreement publicly. Though he believed cooperation with Democrats was 'noteworthy', the plan itself 'has the gauzy contours [sic] of a grand dream, rather than of a practical course of action.' The problem with the accord, Helms argued, was that it was unverifiable and did not maintain support for the Contras as an instrument of leverage:

⁷³⁰ Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, 542.

⁷³¹ "Reagan Misfires With Contra 'Peace Plan'," *Human Events*, 15 August, 1987, 1 and 7.

⁷³² David Hoffman and Helen Dewar, "Reagan Unveils Initiative For Peace In Nicaragua," *Washington Post*, 6 August, 1987, A34.

The only way to make sure the diplomatic initiative will not fail is to make absolutely clear to the Communist regime that the Congress will support full military action by the freedom fighters if necessary. Otherwise, the Communists will perceive that all they have to do is delay, delay, and delay until the freedom fighters run out of weapons and money.⁷³³

Meanwhile, Helms wrote up an amendment to provide \$300 million for the rebels should the peace plan fail. Two days later, Esquipulas II was signed. Helms immediately took to the Senate floor to threaten any legislation, bar the debt-ceiling bill, with his amendment. 'I do not want to see the freedom fighters die on the vine', Helms stated, 'while some illusory proposal goes on to delay the mechanism which has been going on for 8 or 9 years.'⁷³⁴

It is doubtful that Helms viewed his amendment as viable. He had admitted that his proposal would simply be a 'test vote'. Helms maintained 'I am not going to put it as bluntly as one of my colleagues put it', that 'this amendment will make it clear who is voting for the Contras and who is voting for the Communists.' Yet this is precisely what the senator did, stating:

The purpose of the amendment, if I can find the appropriate vehicle this afternoon or this evening, is to get an expression of where Senators stands on this issue. Which side are they on? Are they on the side of the freedom fighters or are they on the side of the Communists?⁷³⁵

⁷³³ Jesse Helms (NC), "Peace Plan For Central America," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 22434.

⁷³⁴ Jesse Helms (NC), "Support For The Nicaraguan Resistance," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 23155.

⁷³⁵ Helms, "Support For The Nicaraguan Resistance," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 23156.

It was a reminder that as much as Helms' 'test votes' were helpful for conservatives keeping tabs on senators, there was also a sense that the senator deployed them as another "bomb throwing" tactic.

Moderates in the Reagan administration, particularly Shultz and Central America envoy Philip Habib, saw Esquipulas II as a success, and Reagan was persuaded to offer a half-hearted welcome for the plan in the aftermath of its signing.⁷³⁶ Despite strong criticism from vocal pro-Contra advocates in the administration, notably Abrams, Carlucci, and Weinberger, and even with outspoken support in the Senate from Chic Hecht, Helms appeared to be increasingly isolated from the president's agenda.⁷³⁷ The senator admitted as much when he noted 'I have not talked to him [Reagan] about what I am doing. I do not know whether he favors it or not.'⁷³⁸

Helms' rigid commitment to the Contras had always left him isolated when seeking to exert influence on the details of legislation, and in August it was no different. The fact that the Contras' directorate ironically steered clear of the more determined aid advocates during a visit to Washington at the time of the aid vote suggested that the senator's intransigence was costing him influence.⁷³⁹

⁷³⁶ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 516-517, and "Statement on the Central American Peace Agreement, 8 August, 1987," *The Public Papers of Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Library, accessed 5 January, 2014, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/080887b.htm>.

⁷³⁷ Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, 544-545, and Chic Hecht (NV), "Support For The Nicaraguan Resistance," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 23156.

⁷³⁸ Jesse Helms (NC), "Support For The Nicaraguan Resistance," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 23156.

⁷³⁹ Memo, Cresencio S. Arcos to Tom Griscom, 24 July, 1987, ID512223, CO114 WHORM: Subject File, *RRL*.

Five weeks later, Helms sought to attach his \$310 million Contra aid package to the National Defense Authorization Act for 1988 and 1989. With co-sponsorship from senators Armstrong, Bond, Hatch, Hecht, Heflin, Shelby, Symms, Thurmond, and Wilson – a sizeable bipartisan, but still conservative, coalition – Helms’ amendment would have allowed Reagan to allocate the funds to the Contras unless the president had certified by, or on, 30 September that there were no Soviet or Cuban bases within Nicaragua that posed a threat to the region; that the Sandinistas posed no threat to their neighbours or provided a staging area for insurgent groups; and that basic human rights were being respected.⁷⁴⁰

In the aftermath of Reagan’s tepid support for Esquipulas, the more ardent anti-Sandinistas in the White House had successfully lobbied for a retreat from that position. Habib resigned after steadfast pro-Contras, led by Weinberger and Abrams, blocked a Shultz proposal for the envoy to travel to Nicaragua to engage with the new peace process. Yet though this suggested the hardliners had gained an upper hand, mixed signals continued to emanate from the White House. The administration, Gutman notes, was acting ‘as if it had lost its compass’, and movement conservatives feared the abandonment of both the Contras and the Reagan Doctrine.⁷⁴¹

Helms’ amendment provided congressional conservatives with a symbolic moment to express their own disappointment at this lack of direction, as well as a rallying point in support of the principled conservative position that its right-wing critics believed the administration had abandoned. ‘I never saw such a team of wild horses with everybody running in a different direction as is the case with this’, Helms lamented,

⁷⁴⁰ Jesse Helms (NC), “National Defense Authorization Act For Fiscal Years 1988 And 1989,” *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 24407.

⁷⁴¹ Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 352, and M. Stanton Evans, “White House Giving Up on ‘Reagan Doctrine’?” *Human Events*, 22 August, 1987, 8. For further details on the post-Esquipulas power struggle, see Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, 545, and LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 517.

while Ernest Hollings believed policy would be hurt if senators did not ‘get them [the administration] to make up their minds.’ ‘I want to help the Contras,’ Hollings stated, ‘but I am having trouble with the administration.’ ‘So am I,’ Helms replied.⁷⁴² It was a damning verdict on the breakdown of a relationship that had long been sustained by a shared commitment to a militarised overthrow of Sandinistas. Now, as policy disarray set in at the White House and NSC, and as Howard Baker grew increasingly influential as Reagan’s new Chief-of-Staff, Helms’ alliance with the administration withered.

In fact, Helms’ amendment threatened to undermine the administration’s new outlook, by backing Abrams’ strategy of seeking a showdown with Congress over Contra aid. Gutman notes that the preference among congressional conservatives, allied with Abrams, was for a final battle with the Democrats. Even if aid were lost, the Contra lobby would be able to charge their foes with being soft on Communism.⁷⁴³ Helms’ request for \$310 million, and his rhetoric on the matter, fitted this approach, though whether the senator negotiated its introduction with Abrams is unclear. Abrams recalled that requests of this sort were often discussed with the senator’s office, but that Helms would also draft proposals without notification.⁷⁴⁴ Doubts over whether the administration officially supported the senator’s actions led to chaos in the Senate, where Helms maintained that the president had expressed his support for the amendment but both John McCain and Bob Dole stated that the

⁷⁴² Helms, “National Defense Authorization Act For Fiscal Years 1988 And 1989,” *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 24411, and Ernest Hollings (SC), “National Defense Authorization Act For Fiscal Years 1988 And 1989,” *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 24411.

⁷⁴³ Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 353.

⁷⁴⁴ Elliot Abrams, interview with author, 7 May, 2014.

administration did not want the Helms amendment brought up until its own aid request had been sent to Congress.⁷⁴⁵

The fundamental logic of Helms' legislative strategy – that principle, not moderation, dictated policy – doomed the amendment. Widespread reluctance among senators to endorse a request perceived as hasty and ill judged stopped Helms' effort. Moreover, previous allies began to disappear, as the pro-Contra network evolved and contracted. Former pro-Contra supporters such as Sam Nunn (D-GA), Chuck Grassley (R-IA), and Alan J. Dixon (D-IL) criticised Helms' tactics. Dixon, a previous floor manager of Contra aid bills, argued that he could not think of 'a worse time when the peace initiative is under serious consideration... this amendment cannot prosper tonight, and that [its authors] are going to lose a good many votes on this side that in the past have supported that effort.'⁷⁴⁶ The Helms amendment was tabled, 61-31, and the symbolic fight that the senator and his conservative allies sought did not materialise. For the rest of the Reagan administration, Helms and the core of the Contra network looked on in horror as the president who had vowed to keep the rebels together, "heart and soul", acquiesced to the pragmatism they so passionately opposed.

Reinvigorating the Network, 1989-1992

When President Bush was elected in November 1988, Helms and the anti-Sandinista network were confronted with an even greater shift over Nicaragua. Worried that continued animosity between the White House and Capitol Hill over the Contras would damage its wider legislative

⁷⁴⁵ Helms, "National Defense Authorization Act For Fiscal Years 1988 And 1989," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 24417, John McCain (AZ), "National Defense Authorization Act For Fiscal Years 1988 And 1989," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 24418, and Bob Dole (KS), "National Defense Authorization Act For Fiscal Years 1988 And 1989," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 24419.

⁷⁴⁶ Alan J. Dixon (IL), "National Defense Authorization Act For Fiscal Years 1988 And 1989," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 24418.

agenda, the new administration acted swiftly to reduce tensions. Prominent and controversial Contra advocates were replaced, and Secretary of State James Baker negotiated a landmark bipartisan accord with Democrats that promised support for the regional peace process in exchange for limited, non-military Contra funding. While the administration still sought to remove the Sandinistas, it would do so through cooperation, not confrontation, both with Democrats and the Central American republics.

Human Events was quick to condemn Helms over his apparent acquiescence to this new era of rapprochement, pointing to an apparent lack of interest in the Contras following Bush's election.⁷⁴⁷ The criticism, however, was unfair. Helms may not have been legislatively active on behalf of the Contras in the early days of the Bush administration, and he had even spoken of Baker's appointment as one that 'bodes well for a foreign policy based on bipartisan consultation.'⁷⁴⁸ However, he pointedly referred to the rebels having been 'left high and dry by Congress' during Baker's Senate confirmation vote, and his pronouncement that the new secretary of state would now introduce 'an American desk' at the State Department might well be construed as a demand rather than a prediction.⁷⁴⁹

⁷⁴⁷ Conservatives Are Failing The Contras," *Human Events*, 4 March, 1989, 1. The magazine's criticism of the new administration's foreign policy framework, and those implementing it, was consistent in the aftermath of Bush's election. For examples, see "Baker Stumbles on Central American Issues," *Human Events*, 18 February, 1989, 4, Ralph Kinney Bennett, "A Warning to George Bush: Who Will Run U.S. Foreign Policy," *Human Events*, 7 January, 1989, 1, and "Bush's Questionable Foreign Policy Team," *Human Events*, 10 December, 1988, 3.

⁷⁴⁸ Jesse Helms (NC), "Nomination Of James Addison Baker III, Of Texas, To Be Secretary Of State," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 436.

⁷⁴⁹ Helms, "Nomination Of James Addison Baker III, Of Texas, To Be Secretary Of State," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 436.

Any suggestion that the senator was at peace with Baker's approach on foreign policy was off the mark.⁷⁵⁰ In mid-March, Helms introduced legislation that called for \$75 million in non-military funding for the Contras while also recommending up to \$50 million in direct military assistance should the Sandinistas renege on their promise to hold free and fair elections the next year. Helms acerbically described his plan as 'the Congressional Credibility Restoration Act of 1989', 'the last chance for this body to put some semblance of substance behind the hundreds of hours of debate that we have heard in this Chamber about the importance of democracy in Nicaragua.'⁷⁵¹

The inflammatory rhetoric was out of touch with the new era of bipartisan toleration over Nicaragua. It was, however, perfectly reflective of the sentiments of a beleaguered anti-Sandinista community that desperately sought to maintain interest in the region.⁷⁵² It also reinforced this same community's argument that the Contras remained the only viable instrument for the U.S. strategy of democracy promotion in Nicaragua.⁷⁵³ As Phil Crane told the House just before Helms' bill was introduced, only the Contras had ever pushed the Sandinistas to reform. If it failed to support the rebels once more, he said, 'Congress is disregarding history at the expense of the freedom of the people of Nicaragua.'⁷⁵⁴

⁷⁵⁰ "Bush's Questionable Foreign Policy Team," 3, "Democrats Relish 'Bipartisan Strategy,'" *Human Events*, 7 January, 1989, 7,

⁷⁵¹ Jesse Helms (NC), "Statements On Introduced Bills And Joint Resolutions," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 4575.

⁷⁵² "Conservatives Are Failing The Contras," *Human Events*, 4 March, 1989, 1, "Bush and Baker Must Make Contras Their Top Priority," *Human Events*, 25 February, 1989, and Henry J. Hyde (IL), "Central America: Guaranteeing A Soviet Beachhead," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 3174-3175.

⁷⁵³ Elliot Abrams, "Are The Contras Finished?" *National Review*, 10 March, 1989, 30-31.

⁷⁵⁴ Philip M. Crane (IL), "The Arias Peace Plan: A Broken Dream," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 4142.

Helms' bill therefore acted as a rallying point for the anti-Sandinista network in a post-Reagan environment. *Human Events* urged its readers to support Helms and his band of 'dissident lawmakers' in their fight to save the Contras, and several long-standing Contra advocates in the Senate co-sponsored the legislation.⁷⁵⁵ In the House, Robert Dornan, the fiery California conservative and long-standing Contra advocate, introduced the Helms bill on behalf of a similar Contra coalition in the lower chamber. To reinforce the bill's importance as a marker point around which conservative pro-Contra forces could orientate themselves, the American Conservative Union included it in its 1989 congressional vote-rating index.⁷⁵⁶

Yet with the bipartisan agreement only days away, Helms' proposal was really only a symbolic act of resistance. So too was the senator's attempt to ward off the on-going regional peace negotiations that were rapidly reaching a consensus on the need for Contra demobilisation prior to Nicaragua's February 1990 elections. Writing to President Bush in late July, along with thirteen other anti-Sandinista conservatives, Helms urged the president to 'take all possible steps' to ward off the Central American plan.⁷⁵⁷ That the senator had been forced to appeal so directly to the president suggested the limits of his influence on behalf of the Contras. Facing policy momentum in favour of the regional peace process, and without institutional allies in the bureaucracy, Helms was left to call upon a president whose Nicaragua policy he had opposed for the past five months.

⁷⁵⁵ "Conservatives Rally Behind Helms' Contra Aid Plan," *Human Events*, 15 April, 1989, 3.

⁷⁵⁶ "1989 ACU Senate Vote Descriptions," *ACU Ratings of Congress*, accessed 10 May, 2014, http://www.conservative.org/ratingsarchive/uscongress/1989/desc_sen.html.

⁷⁵⁷ Letter, Senator Jesse Helms to President George Bush, 27 July, 1989, OA/ID 08610, Miscellaneous, 1989 Senate Requests for Legislative Affairs: Helms, Jesse [1], Office of Legislative Affairs, *GBL*.

The senator's fear that the Contras were about to be abandoned by the U.S. and Central American allies was realised in autumn when, at Tela in Honduras, the five republics agreed to demobilise the Contras. The decision, and particularly Bush's reluctance to stand up for the Contras, was a 'sell out' according to the American right, symptomatic of the new president's 'bankrupt diplomacy'. Conservatives believed, as Helms had told President Bush in July, that without the Contras as leverage, the Sandinistas would not risk a true test of their popularity.⁷⁵⁸ William McGurn, writing in *National Review*, was blunt. 'Today', he wrote, 'the Sandinistas have won'.⁷⁵⁹

Helms' distress at the Bush administration's embrace of the peace process was magnified by the United States' role in the upcoming election. In the run up to the February 1990 elections, U.S. officials helped organise the National Opposition Union (UNO), a broad-based anti-Sandinista political movement which included conservative, centrist, leftist, and even communist groups. Not only did the United States pick Violeta Chamorro to head UNO on account of her pragmatic appeal, but it also set aside \$11.6 million in funds from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) for UNO-affiliated groups. The CIA, having stated it would do nothing to assist the opposition inside Nicaragua, used \$6 million of its own funding to further bolster UNO by training activists outside Nicaraguan territory. Secretary of State James Baker assured Republican leaders that the aid "would not be used for political campaigning", but, as LeoGrande notes, no one in Washington was persuaded that the funding was for anything but supporting the UNO campaign.⁷⁶⁰

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁹ William McGurn, "The Dodd Doctrine," *National Review*, 15 August, 1989, 28.

⁷⁶⁰ Bob Dole (KS), "A Fighting Chance In Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 21373, and LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 559-561. A useful overview of the NED campaign can be found in Colin S. Cavell, *Exporting 'Made-in-*

Surprisingly, the pro-Contra network was largely supportive of the Bush administration's strategy. Many members demonstrated a sudden degree of political pragmatism, as the chance to oust the Sandinistas via the ballot box became a tenable proposition. A large number of congressional conservatives, long-standing allies of Helms in their campaigning on behalf of the rebels, now supported aid to UNO as the best means of ousting the Sandinistas from government. *Human Events*, critical of so much of Bush's Nicaragua policy in 1989, also appeared to accept the rationale for helping UNO, publishing pleas for assistance from knowledgeable observers.⁷⁶¹ When the vote on the assistance package came before the Senate, its passage was assisted by a large number of votes from the pro-Contra community.⁷⁶² Conservative support for UNO, and the administration's policies, was a reminder of the tensions between principle and pragmatism within the movement, and that shifts toward one or the other could occur on territory where a different position had long been staked out.

Helms, however, joined with a coalition of liberals and moderates who were dismayed that the Bush administration would undermine the NED's neutrality. 'You cannot jump start democracy', Helms said, nor 'teach the lessons of democracy by using undemocratic means.'⁷⁶³ The State Department and CIA, who 'know little or nothing about the political process in the United States, much less in other countries', wanted 'to control the

America's Democracy: The National Endowment for Democracy & U.S. Foreign Policy (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002), 105-107.

⁷⁶¹ "Democratic Opposition Uniting in Nicaragua," *Human Events*, 9 September, 1989, 4.

⁷⁶² This group included, among others, Jake Garn, Orin Hatch, Trent Lott, Connie Mack, James McClure, John McCain, Steve Symms, Strom Thurmond, and Malcolm Wallop. "Rollcall Vote No. 250 Leg.," *Cong. Rec* 135 (1989), 24877.

⁷⁶³ Jesse Helms (NC), "Assistance For Free And Fair Elections In Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 24256-24257.

electoral process and prevent an effective nationalist opposition.⁷⁶⁴ Some Republicans, unconvinced by their own leadership's appeal on behalf of the administration, shared these concerns, and Helms became so isolated from other vehement anti-Sandinistas that he embraced bitter enemies in the Senate.⁷⁶⁵

Despite Congress passing the assistance bill, fragmentation of the pro-Contra network and wider congressional debate over electoral aid demonstrated that Nicaragua remained, as William Robinson described it, a 'laboratory' for political intervention.⁷⁶⁶ Yet, while Congress disagreed on how best to support democratisation in Nicaragua, there was overwhelming praise for Chamorro and UNO in the run-up to the election. The pro-Contra network was almost entirely unified in its support for Chamorro, and even those who had expressed doubt about U.S. support for UNO were happy to extoll the virtues of Daniel Ortega's opponents.

That is, except Helms. Where his colleagues, on both sides of the aisle and across all points on the ideological spectrum, saw a champion of freedom and democracy, the senator saw 'pseudo-Sandinistas', offering 'only a weak, "me-too" revolutionary philosophy which they have no means of implementing if they should win.' Chamorro might be a 'nice lady', but she was not 'politically active or particularly knowledgeable.' Her apparent

⁷⁶⁴ Helms, "Assistance For Free And Fair Elections In Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 24257, and Jesse Helms (NC), "Sunday's Nicaragua Elections," *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 2371.

⁷⁶⁵ Republican opposition came from Sen. Mark Hatfield, who claimed the processes was one of 'manipulation and deceit.' Mark Hatfield (OR), "Assistance For Free And Fair Elections In Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 24870. For Democrats, see Patrick Leahy (VT), "Assistance For Free And Fair Elections In Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 24868, Tom Harkin (IA), "Assistance For Free And Fair Elections In Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 24869, and Carl Levin (MI), "Assistance For Free And Fair Elections In Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 24876.

⁷⁶⁶ William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US intervention, and hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 203.

failure to repudiate the Marxist orthodoxy of the Sandinistas, whom she had represented on the 1979 revolutionary junta and whose former labour minister was now her running mate, made her ideologically suspect. 'A weaker candidate', Helms argued, 'is harder to imagine.'⁷⁶⁷ Moreover, according to the senator, not only were the majority of parties in the UNO coalition Communists, but Sandinista candidates had infiltrated UNO as well. Nicaraguans, therefore, faced 'the choice of the Sandinista Party on the one hand, and the United States-backed Communist Party on the other.'⁷⁶⁸

Helms' stinging criticism of Chamorro and UNO was a last ditch effort to legitimise the Contras and return to a militarised solution in Nicaragua, regardless of the election result. In describing Chamorro as a U.S. prop, helping to 'stage a fake election to legitimize the present Communist regime in Managua', the senator set the Contras up as, in his own words, 'the true freedom fighters of Nicaragua'. Only days before the election, the senator claimed that 'the only sign of hope in Nicaragua today is that the Nicaraguan Resistance... have pledged to continue the fight for freedom.' 'Perhaps they [the Contras] will topple the Sandinista government', Helms said, 'whether the Sandinista government is led by Daniel Ortega or led by anyone else.' Having spent months condemning UNO as quasi-Sandinistas, the sentiment appeared as tacit support for military action against a Chamorro government.⁷⁶⁹

When Chamorro won the election, Helms' adversarial stance toward her and UNO further isolated him amid the joyous reaction in Washington.

⁷⁶⁷ Helms, "Assistance For Free And Fair Elections In Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 24258, and Helms, "Sunday's Nicaragua Elections," *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 2372.

⁷⁶⁸ Helms, "Assistance For Free And Fair Elections In Nicaragua," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 24257-24258, and Helms, "Sunday's Nicaragua Elections," *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 2371-2373.

⁷⁶⁹ Helms, "Sunday's Nicaragua Elections," *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 2371-2373.

President Bush announced support for Chamorro's goals of national reconciliation and economic reconstruction, and lauded her as 'a woman of great moral courage, an inspiration to the people of her nation.'⁷⁷⁰ Pro-Contra conservatives also expressed their happiness at Chamorro's victory. Trent Lott, who had co-signed Helms' letter to Bush the previous July, praised Chamorro's 'great victory', while Bob Dole described the Nicaraguan leader as 'an extraordinarily brave and tenacious woman'.⁷⁷¹ Strom Thurmond called the election result 'a victory for freedom, democracy, and peace in Central America.'⁷⁷² Perhaps the most vociferous praise for Chamorro came from Bob Dornan, the outspoken Contra advocate who had introduced Helms' Contra aid bill to the House in March 1989. Chamorro was, Dornan said, "'an elegant lady... a miracle in the history of the Western Hemisphere'" who had 'united' Nicaragua.⁷⁷³

Now standing virtually alone, Helms cautioned against this optimism. 'In Nicaragua,' Helms said, 'there can never be peace, and there can never be fundamental reform of the social and economic system unless all Sandinista, Marxist, and Communist ideologies are removed from decision-

⁷⁷⁰ "Statement on the Election of Violeta Chamorro as President of Nicaragua, 26 February, 1990, Public Papers, George Bush Library, accessed 10 May, 2014, http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=1588, and "Remarks at a White House Briefing on Nicaragua, 16 April, 1990," Public Papers, George Bush Library, accessed 10 May, 2014, http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=1755.

⁷⁷¹ Trent Lott (MS), "The Nicaraguan Election," *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 2504, and Bob Dole (KS), "Two Down, One To Go," *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 2502.

⁷⁷² Strom Thurmond (SC), "Nicaraguan Election Results," *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 2518.

⁷⁷³ Jack Anderson and Dale van Atta, "Rep. Dornan: No Holds Barred," *Washington Post*, 30 March, 1990, E5, Guy Gugliotta, "Criticism Muted as Nicaraguans Visit," *Washington Post*, 17 April, 1991, A14, and Robert K. Dornan (CA), "Nicaraguan Election Process," *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 8393.

making posts.’⁷⁷⁴ In pursuit of this goal, Helms closely scrutinised the Chamorro government during the early 1990s, successfully hindering the Bush and Clinton administrations from sending U.S. aid to assist Nicaragua’s reconstruction. The senator’s campaign helped foster a renewed surge of anti-Sandinista sentiment among conservatives in the United States, and fed a lingering Cold War conservatism that did not acknowledge the disappearance of old ideological battles in a post-Soviet world.

The centrepiece of Helms’ campaign was an August 1992 report produced by Republican staff for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. At the behest of Helms, and led by Deborah DeMoss, the group spent seven months investigating Chamorro’s government and the role of the Sandinistas in post-civil war Nicaragua. They offered scathing criticism of Chamorro’s economic policies and human rights record, and attacked the Sandinistas for their pernicious influence on the country’s social, political, and economic life. James Nance, a retired Navy admiral and old friend of Helms who served as Republican staff director for the Foreign Relations Committee, concluded that the report showed Nicaragua to be ‘overwhelmingly controlled by terrorists, thugs, thieves and murderers at the highest levels.’⁷⁷⁵

Among the most incendiary comments were suggestions that the new Nicaraguan government was complicit in a campaign of assassinations directed at former Contras. The report listed the names of 217 former rebels killed under the Chamorro government, as well as the circumstances of their death. Smaller sections dwelled on other human rights violations, such as restrictions on the freedom of the press, but the focus lay mainly on

⁷⁷⁴ Jesse Helms (NC), “The Nicaraguan Election: Beware Trojan Horses,” *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 2937.

⁷⁷⁵ Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nicaragua Today*, 102nd Cong, 2nd sess., S. Rpt 102-102, v.

the deaths of former resistance fighters.⁷⁷⁶ The Contras deaths led Helms to describe post-war Nicaragua as a repressive and violent state, where former rebel leaders-turned civilians were being ‘massacred’ by a new government guilty of ‘a systematic campaign of murder.’⁷⁷⁷

No other issue was given greater priority in the report, however, than that of property rights. It concluded 465 Americans had a total of over 2,000 claims regarding property appropriated by the Sandinistas yet to be returned by Chamorro’s government, and stated that progress would only be made when every single item of confiscated property was returned to the appropriate citizens. ‘Without the respect for basic private property rights,’ the report argued, ‘no other economic reforms in Nicaragua will be meaningful or lasting.’⁷⁷⁸ ‘[T]he stolen homes and businesses of hundreds of American and Nicaragua citizens remain in the hands of thieves’, he told Senate colleagues in 1993, ‘with the blessing of the Chamorro government.’⁷⁷⁹

The research conducted at Helms’ direction increasingly coloured the conservative view of the Chamorro’s government. It was true that several conservatives in Congress were already expressing grave concerns over property rights and human rights violations before the report’s publication, but its conclusions energised the anti-Sandinista community.⁷⁸⁰ M. Stanton

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid., 65-95.

⁷⁷⁷ Jesse Helms (NC), “Murder Of Nicaraguan Free Fighter Enrique Bermudez,” *Cong. Rec.* 137 (1991), 4258-4259, and Helms, “Not Another Cent For Nicaragua,” *Cong. Rec.* 137 (1993), 7458.

⁷⁷⁸ Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nicaragua Today*, 102nd Cong, 2nd sess., S. Rpt 102-102, 9-25.

⁷⁷⁹ Helms, “Not Another Cent For Nicaragua,” *Cong. Rec.* 139 (1993), 7458.

⁷⁸⁰ Duncan Hunter (CA), “Godoy Speaks Out For A New Nicaragua,” *Cong. Rec.* 137 (1991), 13040-13041, Steve Symms (ID), “No Change In Nicaragua,” *Cong. Rec.* 137 (1991), 14948-14949, Robert Lagormasino (CA), “Nicaragua’s Sandinistas Resist Pressure To Return Confiscated Items,”

Evans, citing 'the mass of evidence' accumulated by Helms and his staff, called for direct assistance to be terminated until 'the power of the Sandinistas is broken and the assassins and other criminals are brought to justice.'⁷⁸¹ The following year, Elliot Abrams argued in *National Review* that human rights violations in Nicaragua did little to support the claim democracy had 'triumphed' there, while in *Human Events* Jeane Kirkpatrick concluded Chamorro had been fooled by the Sandinistas.⁷⁸²

More significantly, the report forced the Bush administration to respond to Helms' concerns. Deputy assistant secretary of state John F. Maisto was sent to Nicaragua to emphasise the United States' desire for greater progress on human rights, democracy promotion, and economic growth, and State Department officials declared that aid to Nicaragua would be denied until Chamorro took steps to mollify Helms.⁷⁸³ At the same time, hoping to persuade Helms to relent in his campaign, Secretary of State James Baker negotiated a compromise with Chamorro in which the U.S. would release \$50 million in aid in return for the firing of the Sandinista head of police and replacement of a third of Sandinistas in the force.⁷⁸⁴ Though intended to persuade Helms to relent in his obstructionism, it

Cong. Rec. 137 (1991), 19221, and Bud Shuster (PA), "Nicaragua: Sandinistas Still In Charge," *Cong. Rec.* 138 (1992), 21469.

⁷⁸¹ M. Stanton Evans, "Sandinistas Still in Power in Nicaragua," *Human Events*, 12 September, 1992, 6.

⁷⁸² Elliot Abrams, "Lost Victory," *National Review*, 12 April, 1993, 19, and Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Sandinistas Wage New Power Plays in Nicaragua," *Human Events*, 13 June, 1992, 9.

⁷⁸³ Clifford Krauss, "U.S. Cooling Toward Sandinistas' Successors," *The New York Times*, 3 September, 1992, A3, and John Goshko, "State Department Assails Chamorro," *Washington Post*, 2 September, 1992, A27.

⁷⁸⁴ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 424. In the short term, Helms got one of his wishes when Chamorro replaced her police chief, though she claimed the move was aimed at professionalising law enforcement. Shirley Christian, "Chamorro Dismisses Her Police Chief, a Sandinistas," *The New York Times*, 6 September, 1992, 9.

failed to impress the senator. He taped a message, played out to cheering crowds in Nicaragua by DeMoss, in which he declared he would “not back down” in the face of that “defiant lady in Managua.”⁷⁸⁵

Helms’ ability to push the Bush (and, later, the Clinton) administration in his preferred policy direction said much about the importance of property rights in the neoliberal economic worldview that dominated the United States’ foreign agenda during the early and mid-1990s.⁷⁸⁶ While there was criticism from individual senators – Arkansas Democrat Bill Alexander condemned Helms’ hold on aid as ‘astonishing both procedurally and substantively – by 1994, senior senators were telling Chamorro that congressional support for extensive aid had ‘all but evaporated’.⁷⁸⁷ The *Washington Post* criticised Helms’ strategy as ‘heavy-handed’, ‘unnecessary’ and ‘un-helpful’, and Nicaragua’s foreign minister suggested that the Bush administration had sacrificed the country’s future to gain Helms’ support for the president’s re-election campaign, but Congress was largely willing to follow Helms and the administration.⁷⁸⁸ Though it could hardly be argued that senators and executive officials had flocked to his cause in the early 1990s, it was nevertheless the case that the senator’s efforts had contributed to a noticeable cooling in relations between the United States and post-civil war Nicaragua. The net result was

⁷⁸⁵ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 424.

⁷⁸⁶ Henry Patterson, “The United States and Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua,” *Irish Journal of American Studies* 3 (1993), 79, Walter Russell Mead, “The Bush Administration and the New World Order,” *World Policy Journal* 8, No. 3 (Summer, 1991), 383-384, and Smith, *America’s Mission*, 316

⁷⁸⁷ William Alexander (AK), “Report On The Status Of Nicaragua,” *Cong. Rec.* 138 (1992), 26139, Douglas Farah, “Americans’ Land Claims Unsettling for Nicaragua,” *Washington Post*, 21 December, 1994, A28, and Patrick Leahy (VT), “Report On Trip To Honduras, El Salvador, And Nicaragua,” *Cong. Rec.* 140 (1994), 1119.

⁷⁸⁸ “On Nicaragua’s Back,” *Washington Post*, 2 September, 1992, A20, and Douglas Farah, “Central Americans Feels Abandoned by Bush at Crucial Time,” *Washington Post*, 22 November, 1992, A31.

an American disengagement from Nicaragua that, for Helms at least, represented a hardly rousing, but at least somewhat successful culmination to almost a decade and a half of engagement.

In 1992, two years after the Sandinistas were defeated at the ballot box, Pat Buchanan addressed the Republican Party national convention in Houston. Buchanan attributed U.S. success in Nicaragua to Ronald Reagan. In that country, according to the president's former communications director and long-serving member of the anti-Sandinista network, 'the Marxist regime was forced to hold free elections – by Ronald Reagan's contra army – and the communists were thrown out of power.'⁷⁸⁹ There is considerable debate over the effectiveness of the Contras as an instrument of policy, but in any case, Buchanan's hagiographic depiction of the former president's role in policy was a disservice to his fellow anti-Sandinistas, and in particular, to Senator Helms.⁷⁹⁰ There was no 'Ronald Reagan's contra army'; there was, however, an army – and a doctrine – based on the actions and ideology of a collection of individuals whose relationship with Helms, and his with them, was a crucial element in the war against the Sandinistas.

⁷⁸⁹ Patrick J. Buchanan, "1992 Republican National Convention Speech, 17 August, 1992," *Patrick J. Buchanan – Official Website*, accessed 29 October, 2012, <http://buchanan.org/blog/1992-republican-national-convention-speech-148>.

⁷⁹⁰ Chester Pach argues that the momentum toward democracy in Nicaragua occurred only after the United States terminated lethal assistance to the Contras, thus Nicaragua was 'no victory' for the Reagan Doctrine. Pach, "The Reagan Doctrine," 84. Highly critical of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, Grace Livingstone notes the impact of the Contras on pushing the Sandinistas toward a war economy. Grace Livingstone, *America's Backyard: The United States and Latin America from the Monroe Doctrine to the War on Terror* (London: Zed Books, 2009), 100. Robert Kagan argues most forcefully that external pressure was necessary to force the Sandinistas into holding elections in 1990, and that U.S. support for the Contras was 'essential.' Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, 721.

That Helms achieved such influence on anti-Sandinista policy was a product of his integration within a network of hard-line anti-Sandinistas whose goal of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government was evident even prior to Reagan's election as president. Helms valued such networks for their information-gathering abilities.⁷⁹¹ As has been noted, in the case of Nicaragua the senator utilised such information as part of a wider campaign to draw attention to alleged Sandinista atrocities and totalitarian programmes. In doing so, Helms helped to articulate the Reagan Doctrine as a defence of democracy and human freedoms.

Yet such networks do not simply act as conduits for information. Alliances offer a source of wider support for actions carried out in order to achieve shared goals.⁷⁹² Helms was astute in recognising that his goals in Nicaragua were shared by a wide range of individuals, both in the U.S. and across the hemisphere. In developing relationships with these figures, the senator was contributing to a group whose influence lay not in the actions of a single member, but in the combined strength of the community. Thus, Carbaugh, Hamrick, and Schamis could tie their efforts in with the Argentines and Hondurans. Tambs and North could operate together in opening up their desired southern front. Singlaub and Pastora could work to draw a banished group back into the Contra fold. The support was mutually reinforcing, and all the more influential because of it.

In a post-Vietnam political environment in which Congress had reasserted its prerogatives in the foreign policy sphere, Helms understood that the decision-making process contained many points of access, and an individual could achieve much greater leverage by seeking out these opportunities and taking advantage of their existence. By actively seeking connections – directly, or through proxies – with individuals and groups like Oliver North, Elliot Abrams, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Eden Pastora, Lewis

⁷⁹¹ Helms, *Here's Where I Stand*, 208.

⁷⁹² Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 246.

Tambs, Gerardo Schamis and the Argentinean military, and Colonel Gustavo Álvarez Martínez and the Honduran armed forces – the senator successfully located, and achieved, access to a range of these contact points.

This is not to say that Helms was consistently successful in his anti-Sandinista initiatives, or that we must consider the strategy as a “Helms Doctrine”. There were failures, or at least weaknesses, in the senator’s use of the network and his personal rhetorical and legislative tactics. Congress was rarely persuaded by Helms’ efforts against the Sandinistas. Though the network allowed him to be updated on the state of the Contra crusade, it failed to provide many votes on the Hill. Helms’ ideological rigidity kept him on the margins of the legislative battles over Contra aid, and it was the more moderate members of Congress – those willing to bend over certain aspects of legislation – who achieved the most influence on policy. His partisan efforts to support the Contras were more often than not doomed by over-reaching, or by his unwillingness to compromise on matters of principle – a political strategy about which he was unapologetic.⁷⁹³

Yet when considering the development of the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua, it can be seen that Contra policy was not merely the application of the president’s, or his senior team’s, ideology and directives. A wider network of hard-line anti-Sandinistas, within which Jesse Helms played a critical role, contributed to the formulation, development and active implementation of anti-Sandinista strategy. James Scott has argued that these kinds of alliances, which competed with rival networks of policy advocates, have just as great a claim on the Reagan Doctrine as individuals within the White House. ‘Credit, if it is due,’ Scott declares, ‘must be shared.’⁷⁹⁴ In seeking to apply the Reagan Doctrine to Nicaragua, Senator Jesse Helms could justly claim some of that credit.

⁷⁹³ Helms, *Here’s Where I Stand*, 64.

⁷⁹⁴ Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 253.

Panama, 1981-1992

Between 1981 and 1986, Panama retreated to the periphery of U.S.-Central American relations. The Reagan administration believed U.S. interests in the Isthmus – security of the Canal and the right to maintain military bases – were safe despite changes in the country’s leadership after Omar Torrijos’ death in 1981. Panama’s National Guard (restructured, after 1984, into the Panamanian Defense Force, or PDF), under the leadership of Manuel Antonio Noriega, promised to continue the transition toward civilian rule started by Torrijos. Even after fraudulent elections in 1984 and the ousting of the Panamanian president in late 1985, the United States expressed little concern. Noriega, both a CIA asset and Cuban informer, with ties to the Medellín drug cartel and regional arms smuggling, proved helpful in the war on the Sandinistas. In return, the Reagan administration looked the other way as he cemented his position at the centre of Panama’s political life.⁷⁹⁵ In these years, Panama returned to its position as what John Dinges called ‘the sideshow in Central America’.⁷⁹⁶

Yet, in December 1989, less than a year after the Reagan administration left office, the United States invaded Panama, captured Noriega, and extradited him to Florida to face drug trafficking charges. President Bush called the operation – itself bluntly code-named Just Cause – ‘a noble cause’, associating the six-week long battle with Ronald Reagan’s infamous description of the Vietnam War.⁷⁹⁷ It was one of the major ironies

⁷⁹⁵ Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, 167-169.

⁷⁹⁶ John Dinges, *Our Man in Panama: How General Noriega Used The United States – and Made Millions in Drugs and Arms* (New York: Random House, 199), 318.

⁷⁹⁷ “Remarks Announcing the Surrender of General Manuel Noriega in Panama, 3 March, 1990,” *Public Papers*, George Bush Library, accessed 23 May, 2014, http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=1397.

of Central America policy in the late Cold War that Bush, a president maligned by movement conservatives for his tepid, bipartisan strategy in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and not Ronald Reagan, was the one to deploy U.S. troops in Central America. That such an action took place in Panama, and not El Salvador or Nicaragua, was testament to a dramatic realignment of U.S. policy in the second half of the 1980s.

Jesse Helms was instrumental in this course correction. From the start of 1986 onwards, the senator engaged in a persistent campaign of policy entrepreneurship that helped shift congressional opinion on Panama and forced the Reagan and Bush administrations to re-evaluate the United States' close relationship with Manuel Noriega. Helms was the first member of Congress to focus the nation's attention on critical themes that came to dominate the Panama debate: Noriega's drug trafficking and human rights abuses, as well as his money laundering, weapons smuggling, and association with Cuba. Using institutional mechanisms afforded by his position in the Senate, notably committee hearings and floor speeches, the senator reshaped perceptions of Panama's role in Central America's instability.

Crucially, Helms' actions took place as part of a broad Senate coalition against Noriega. Built upon an unlikely alliance with liberal Massachusetts Democrat John Kerry, who shared Helms' interest in controlling hemispheric drug trafficking, the anti-Noriega community in the upper chamber eventually comprised nearly all one hundred senators. Working in close cooperation with his colleagues from 1986 until late 1989, Helms introduced several pieces of legislation that emphasised congressional discontent with U.S. policy in the Isthmus or, at key moments, imposed a measure of institutional oversight on an executive branch uneasy about threats to its existing Panama policy.

The power of Helms' entrepreneurship derived from the resonance of the themes he prioritised. At a time when the war on drugs was permeating

the national consciousness, the senator's relentless campaign to expose Noriega's links to the hemispheric narcotics trade tapped into a powerful public fear. Likewise, his discussion of Panama's human rights abuses and subversion of the democratic process co-opted the language of democracy promotion and humanitarianism that both sides of the Central America divide in Washington had come to employ during the 1980s. These issues created a solid foundation upon which he and his colleagues could work, despite being at odds over many other aspects of regional policy.

Yet while Helms' actions were a striking, and rare, example of his ability to work with ideological adversaries, his entrepreneurship remained rooted in conservative principles. His horror at Noriega's links to drug trafficking was a product of social conservative consternation at the impact of illegal substances on the moral fabric of American society. Likewise, his targeting of the Panamanian was consistent with the American right's focus on the need to address the drug problem on the supply side. Helms' attempts to reform Panama's secretive banking culture, partly related to its specific role in the laundering of drug profits, emerged from his fusionist, pristine-capitalist economic framework that treated transnational finance with suspicion.

Moreover, Helms' perception that removing Noriega represented a defeat for communism qualifies the view of scholars that Operation Just Cause was a post-Cold War action.⁷⁹⁸ The invasion of Panama is attributed to several factors, with the war on drugs and Bush's desire to project American (and his own) strength being among the foremost. There are undoubtedly good reasons to accept these arguments, and the timing of the conflict – as Eastern Europe emerged from Soviet control and the transition toward democracy accelerated throughout Latin America – means Just Cause was situated at a time when the Bush administration began to face a

⁷⁹⁸ Eytan Gilboa, "The Panama Invasion Revisited: Lessons for the Use of Force in the Post Cold War Era," *Political Science Quarterly* 110, No. 4 (Winter, 1995-1996), 539, and Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy*, 357.

new international order. Yet for Jesse Helms, and for conservatives more widely, the downfall of Manuel Noriega was very much the culmination of a campaign rooted in Central America's Cold War.

A Disappearing Cause? The Panama Canal, 1981-1986

Between 1981 and 1986, Helms' interest in Panama remained centred on the Canal. The intensity of his focus recalled his vociferous opposition to the treaties during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter years, not least when he described matters relating to increasing the size of the waterway as 'among the gravely important questions' that faced the United States or spoke of the modernisation of the Canal as a matter of 'global geopolitical importance and crucial for both interoceanic commerce and hemisphere security.'⁷⁹⁹ Such rhetoric was reinforced by his attendance at hearings dedicated to the Canal, outside his Foreign Relations Committee remit, such as John East's 1983 hearings on the unconstitutionality of the treaties. It was clear that the future of the waterway had lost none of its importance to the senator.

Helms' activism on this issue was well received by the grassroots anti-Treaties lobby.⁸⁰⁰ In the same year, after the Reagan administration transferred air-traffic control responsibility for Canal airspace to Panama, the staunchly anti-Treaties Canal Watchers Education Association expressed considerable alarm at the decision partly on the basis that Helms had not been consulted.⁸⁰¹ Though sporadic, such examples showed the senator's enduring support from lower-level organisations opposed to the

⁷⁹⁹ Jesse Helms (NC), "The Panama Canal," *Cong. Rec.* 129 (1893), 5983.

⁸⁰⁰ Letter, Phillip Harman to Robert McFarlane, 19 July, 1983, ID188683, CO121, WHORM: Subject File, *RRL*, and G. Russell Evans, "Hearings on Canal Treaties Fraud Ignored by Senate and the Media," *Human Events*, 6 August, 1983, 12.

⁸⁰¹ Letter, Frank B Turberville, Jr. to William Clark, 31 May, 1983, ID151736, CO121, WHORM: Subject File, *RRL*.

Carter-Torrijos agreements, years after the anti-Treaties campaign was supposed to have come to an end.

Yet while his stock within the anti-Treaties movement remained high, there was no doubting that Helms' interest in Panama had declined in the first half of the 1980s. The crises in El Salvador and Nicaragua shifted attention away the Isthmus and, with only limited time and resources, the senator devoted his energies to these more pressing issues. He was hardly alone in this respect, as the nation and its policymakers focused on conflict enveloping other nations in the United States' backyard.

The senator may also have accepted that the Reagan administration had resigned itself to upholding the Canal Treaties, despite its campaign rhetoric and the wishes of grass-roots conservatives who had provided so much of the momentum for its election victory. Certainly there were those in the White House who did not wish to accept Carter's framework without question. Roger Fontaine, a prominent member of the anti-Treaties community, told the president's National Security Adviser only weeks into the new term that the administration had to work quickly lest it 'end up merely following the lines laid down by the Carter Administration'.⁸⁰² Nevertheless, internal policy debate was centred over how, not whether, to implement the treaties, and the State Department was ordered to make it clear to the international community that continuity would exist in the nation's Panama policy.⁸⁰³ After president-elect Reagan had written to his Panamanian counterpart in December 1980, U.S. ambassador Ambler Moss informed Panama the following August that the United States would

⁸⁰² Memorandum, Roger Fontaine to Richard Allen, "Panama Canal Appropriations Authorization Act, FY1982," 22 April, 1981, folder "Panama (04/19/1981 - 06/16/1981)," Box 33, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File, Latin America, *RRL*.

⁸⁰³ Don Oberdorfer, "Foreign Policy: Changes Vast, Pace Cautious," *Washington Post*, 10 May, 1981, A1.

continue to honour Reagan's pledge to 'to respect and carry out fully' the treaties.⁸⁰⁴

Moss' very presence was indicative of the administration's pragmatism over Panama Canal policy. A holdover from the Carter administration, Moss was retained on the advice of Howard Baker, the moderate Republican Senate leader who had voted in favour of the treaties.⁸⁰⁵ Not all White House staff agreed with the decision – one official described it as a 'wrong direction' for the new administration – but Baker's proposal received the endorsement of influential conservatives like Fontaine and National Security Adviser Richard Allen.⁸⁰⁶

At the same time, it was clear that hard-line grassroots anti-Treaties groups associated with Helms lacked sway with the administration now that it had transitioned from conservative opposition to conservative government. When anti-Treaties activists appealed to the White House, they received short shrift. Al Sapia-Bosch, Latin America specialist at the National Security Council, described the head of the Canal Watchers Education Association as 'a nut.'⁸⁰⁷ Bob Kimmitt, executive secretary of the NSC, warned that such individuals should be ignored.⁸⁰⁸ Keen to steer the

⁸⁰⁴ Cable, American Embassy Panama City to Secretary of State, 11 August, 1981, folder "(7/24/81 – 8/14/81)," Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File, Latin America, Box 33, *RRL*.

⁸⁰⁵ Letter, Howard Baker to Alexander Haig, 6 February 1981, folder "Panama (2/17/81 – 3/30/81)," Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File, Latin America, Box 33, *RRL*.

⁸⁰⁶ See Memorandum, Roger Fontaine to Richard Allen, 17 February, 1981, folder "Panama (2/17/81 – 3/30/81)," Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File, Latin America, Box 33, *RRL*, and Memorandum, Richard Allen to Alexander Haig, 20 February, 1981, folder "Panama (2/17/81 – 3/30/81)," Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File, Latin America, Box 33, *RRL*.

⁸⁰⁷ Memorandum, Al Sapia-Bosch to Dick Morris, "Use of Howard AFB in Panama," 10 June, 1983, ID151736, C0121, WHORM: Subject File, *RRL*.

⁸⁰⁸ Note, Robert Kimmitt to Dick Morris, 10 June, 1983, ID151736, C0121, WHORM: Subject File, *RRL*.

Panama narrative away from the Canal, the administration looked critically upon those that might threaten the stability of U.S.-Panamanian relations. Ideological Canal warriors lost the battle again, and this time with a supposedly sympathetic administration, a fact that aroused the ire of grassroots conservatives who had expected 'a quick abrogation' of the treaties.⁸⁰⁹

This closing of the policy window in the United States was reinforced by the actions of the Panamanian government. Despite political turbulence during the first half of the 1980s as the planned democratic transition faltered and Noriega's hold on power grew, Panama did little that Helms could have used to accuse it of sabotaging the security of the Canal or reneging on the 1978 agreements. As William Furlong noted in January 1988, any problems concerning the Canal during the previous decade had been resolved 'through a tranquil, established process' set out by the treaties.⁸¹⁰ This bilateral collaboration, part of the wider cooperation between the Reagan administration and its Panamanian counterpart in these years, minimised tensions that the senator could have otherwise used to his advantage.

Their Man in Panama: Manuel Noriega, 1986-1988

By the end of 1986, Helms had come to question the indifference that had dominated U.S. policy in Panama for the previous five years. He publicly attacked Noriega as "head of the biggest drug trafficking operation in the Western Hemisphere" and "a business partner with Castro", and asked whether Panama now represented a national security threat to the

⁸⁰⁹ "Conservative Forum," *Human Events*, 2 October, 1982, 18.

⁸¹⁰ William L. Furlong, "The 1977 Panama Canal Treaties: The Non-Issue Issue," *The World Today* 44, No. 1 (January, 1988), 13.

United States.⁸¹¹ He held hearings into the situation in Panama that, while failing to generate much traction at the time, played a considerable part in starting the momentum toward a wholesale change in Panama policy. Moreover, the hearings demonstrated a thus-far rare intrusion by the legislative branch into the Reagan administration's Panama policies, posing an uncomfortable challenge to an executive branch loath to reveal its cooperation with Noriega. By the time the year closed, Helms had greatly increased his oversight of the administration, and even engaged in an open feud with CIA director William Casey over the agency's intelligence on Noriega. Helms dramatically and very suddenly departed from what had been formerly a predictable, but relatively low-key, Canal-based interest in Panama.

Helms' abrupt transformation can be traced to the September 1985 murder of Dr. Hugo Spadafora, a popular and charismatic revolutionary figure in Panama. Spadafora, a former minister of health for Torrijos who had fought Somoza and then the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, was a vocal critic of Noriega and the PDF. Throughout the first half of the 1980s, he regularly accused the general and senior officers of corruption, drug trafficking, and political oppression. In September 1986, members of the PDF took Spadafora off a bus, before torturing and then executing him. His headless body was left just inside the Costa Rican side of the border with Panama.⁸¹² It was never subsequently proved that Noriega directly ordered the murder, but he certainly contributed to its cover-up.⁸¹³

⁸¹¹ John Herbers, "Panama General Accused By Helms," *The New York Times*, 23 June, 1986, A3, and Jesse Helms (NC), "Intelligence Authorization Act," *Cong. Rec.* 132 (1986), 25807.

⁸¹² Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 236, Frederick Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator: America's Bungled Affairs with Noriega* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1990), 176, and Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 324.

⁸¹³ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 231.

Spadafora's murder was an act of violence unusual in Panamanian politics, whose instability had been largely confined to mostly bloodless struggles within the PDF. This was part of the reason why U.S. policymakers paid little attention to the country during the early part of the 1980s.⁸¹⁴ The identity of the victim, and the brutality of the crime, caused outrage in Panama, exacerbated by Noriega's decision to force President Nicolás Barletta's resignation when he publicly called for an investigation. In the United States, however, events received little immediate attention. A handful of newspaper articles, buried in the back pages, offered only cursory commentary on the potential damage to Reagan's Central America democratisation strategy.⁸¹⁵ Capitol Hill was also unmoved. In the aftermath of the murder, only three members of Congress – Michael Barnes and Dante Fascell in the House, and David Durenberger in the Senate – spoke about the case.⁸¹⁶ When Spadafora's brother, Winston, visited Washington in late 1985 to gather support for his campaign for justice, he found a sympathetic but largely uninterested American political elite. There was little indication that Spadafora's murder was about to become, as Margaret Scranton called it, Noriega's 'Watergate'.⁸¹⁷

⁸¹⁴ Donald Mabry, "Panama's Policy Toward the United States: Living with Big Brother," in *Operation Just Cause: The U.S. Intervention in Panama*, eds. Bruce W. Watson and Peter G. Tsouras (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 12.

⁸¹⁵ "Panama 'Beheaded'," *Washington Post*, 6 December, 1985, A26, James LeMoyne, "The Opposition Takes Cover in Panama," *The New York Times*, 13 October, 1985, E3, "Poor Panama," *Washington Post*, 6 October, 1985, D6, and "Add Panama to the Critical List," *The New York Times*, 3 October, 1985, A26.

⁸¹⁶ For these remarks, see Michael Barnes (MD), "Trouble In Panama," *Cong. Rec.* 131 (185), 28455-28456, David Durenberger (MN), "Democracy In Panama," *Cong. Rec.* 131 (1985), 29404-29405, Dante Fascell (FL), "Time For Democracy In Panama," *Cong. Rec.* 131 (1985), 36123, and Michael Barnes (MD), "Panama 'Beheaded'," *Cong. Rec.* 131 (1985), 37512.

⁸¹⁷ Margaret Scranton, *The Noriega Years: U.S.-Panamanian Relations, 1981-1990* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991), 23.

In January 1986, Helms met with Winston Spadafora. It was indicative of his staff's activist nature that the meeting came about through the advice of Deborah DeMoss, who had decided to meet with Winston during his ill-fated trip to Washington at the end of the previous year. There was little ideological common ground between Helms and Winston Spadafora, as the latter readily acknowledged, and given that it took DeMoss' intervention to arrange their get-together, it seemed the senator had little enthusiasm initially for dealing with the family of a prominent Torrijista. Nevertheless, when Helms emerged from the meeting, he appeared outraged by what he had heard. "I'm going to promise to work my hardest to get justice for your brother and to raise the issue to the level of President Reagan's agenda", he reportedly told Winston.⁸¹⁸

Helms did exactly as promised, moving swiftly to introduce legislation in the Senate that would have blocked U.S. assistance to Panama until an investigation into Spadafora's death and Noriega's drug trafficking was carried out.⁸¹⁹ Just as a lack of congressional interest in his brother's death the previous autumn doomed Winston Spadafora's initiatives, so too did an apathetic Senate disregard Helms' efforts now. There was no indication that the senator's concerns over human rights and drug trafficking in Panama had traction with his colleagues, who continued in early 1986 to permit the executive branch a free hand in the Isthmus.

Indeed, part of the problem was that Helms was the messenger. Democrats were suspicious that he was using the Spadafora case and related drug trafficking accusations as a new form of leverage to repeal the Canal Treaties. Chris Dodd, reacting to Helms' proposal in the Foreign Relations Committee, accused Helms of conspiring to re-claim the Canal, while John Kerry privately expressed his suspicion that Helms had recognised an opportunity to build pressure on the administration to

⁸¹⁸ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 236.

⁸¹⁹ Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 176.

repeal the treaties. Such concerns were widespread among those who understood Helms' long-standing antipathy toward the Carter-Torrijos agreements.⁸²⁰

In the future, the senator and his staff would attempt to counter these suspicions by portraying their reaction to the Spadafora case as one of non-partisan, humanitarian concern. Looking back on the meeting, DeMoss recalled Helms' reaction to photographs of Spadafora's tortured body as one of revulsion. "I don't think I've ever seen Helms so moved," she said. "He looked at the photographs a long time, and then he put them down and shook his head. That's when he decided to do something."⁸²¹ The senator, for his part, frequently emphasised the brutality of the murder when he later spoke about the case, pointedly reminding observers that he had little in common with Spadafora's ideology (which he described as Social Democratic).⁸²²

The senator's previous politicisation of human rights abuses suggests this was only part of the story. After all, the Maryknoll nun murders and Jesuit killings in El Salvador – high profile and equally brutal cases – had not elicited a similar reaction. Nor had Somoza-era repression in Nicaragua registered highly on the senator's radar. Only in Nicaragua, where Miskito communities faced Sandinista reprisals, did Helms raise an outcry. It was a consistent pattern of filtering human rights violations through a broader anti-communist framework.

⁸²⁰ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 237, and Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 176.

⁸²¹ Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 176.

⁸²² Jesse Helms (NC), "Panama: Five Years After Death Of Torrijos," *Cong. Rec.* 132 (1986), 18103, and Jesse Helms (NC), "Intelligence Authorization Act," *Cong. Rec.* 132 (1986), 25807-25813.

Perhaps no incident illustrated this as clearly as the case of Rodrigo Rojas, a young Chilean protestor tortured and burnt to death on 2 July 1986 by members of General Pinochet's security forces. The timing of this incident, described by Mary Helen Spooner as 'one of the most flagrant human rights abuses in the Pinochet regime's history', was telling.⁸²³ Even as Helms portrayed his interest in the Spadafora murder as part of a wider concern for human rights and democracy in Panama, he continued to support the Pinochet government. Helms described Rojas as a "terrorist", and privately told Ambassador Harry Barnes that he had "screwed it up" by going to the funeral without authorisation. Only members of the extreme left had attended the service, Helms said, and Barnes had planted "the American flag in the midst of a communist activity."⁸²⁴

The difference in reaction was rooted in Helms' faith in Pinochet's anti-communism and the notion of ordered democratic progress. "Chile is one of two countries in the entire Latin American area that resists communism", he said at the time. "Its transition to democracy is on an orderly course."⁸²⁵ On the other hand, Helms increasingly regarded Noriega as an ally of Castro, a threat to U.S. national security interests (especially the Canal), and an impediment to Panama's shift toward full civilian government. Drugs also played a part. Though he had been informed by Ambassador Barnes that Chile's cooperation on anti-drugs policy was less convincing than the senator believed, Helms remained convinced that Pinochet's government was free from the pernicious

⁸²³ Mary Helen Spooner, *Soldiers in a Narrow Land: The Pinochet Regime in Chile* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 209.

⁸²⁴ "Rojas Case," 15 July 1986, *Virtual Reading Room*, U.S. Department of State, <http://foia.state.gov/>, accessed 3 September, 2013, and Shirley Christian, "Helms, in Chile, Denounces U.S. Envoy," *The New York Times*, 14 July, 1986, A3.

⁸²⁵ Malcolm Coad, "Helms, in Chile, Criticizes U.S. Press, State Department," *Washington Post*, 12 July, 1986, A14.

influence of the hemisphere's drug cartels.⁸²⁶ The senator did not believe the same of Noriega and the PDF.

Consequently, Helms sided with the mounting internal opposition to Noriega in Panama while simultaneously maintaining his long-standing support for Pinochet. Both cases represented a break with the Reagan administration. In Chile, Elliot Abrams denounced the senator's criticism of Barnes as "indefensible" and his support for long-term military rule in Chile as "playing into the hands of the communists."⁸²⁷ Though President Reagan privately regarded Pinochet as an admirable bastion of anti-communism, and despite stubborn resistance from administration hard-liners, the State Department had begun pushing Pinochet toward democratic reform.⁸²⁸

Similarly, Helms' interest in Panama led to his growing isolation from the executive branch, including from many conservatives with whom the senator had cooperated over Nicaragua policy. In 1986, almost the entirety of the foreign-policy bureaucracy was in agreement that excessive pressure on Noriega was counter-productive. Only Constantine Menges at the NSC and Carlton Turner, the president's special advisor on drug control, supported efforts to reinstate Barletta following his ousting by Noriega. Even Ambassador Ted Briggs, a close Helms ally, tempered his initial hard-line on Noriega in light of the wider goals of the Reagan's Central America policy. ⁸²⁹ Elliot Abrams' decision to overrule Briggs' initial

⁸²⁶ "Rojas Case," 15 July 1986, *Virtual Reading Room*, U.S. Department of State, <http://foia.state.gov/>, accessed 3 September, 2013, and Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 330.

⁸²⁷ John M. Goshko, "Elliot Abrams: 'Tough Guy' of Convictions on Reagan's Team at State," *Washington Post*, 21 July, 1986, A13.

⁸²⁸ Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, 155-157.

⁸²⁹ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 231-232. Helms would later credit Briggs, along with his successor, Arthur Davis, as consistent opponents of Noriega. In February, 1990, he told colleagues, 'When others were making excuses, and giving supposed pragmatic reasons to support a gangster, these

recommendation of support for Barletta also indicated concern for the wider policy ramifications for a then-stable Panama.⁸³⁰

These concerns translated into efforts to persuade Helms to abandon his March and April hearings into Panama. Nestor Sanchez, an ally of the senator on Nicaragua policy, advised Helms against the sessions, but it was Abrams who appeared as the administration's main voice. He phoned Helms before the hearings to specifically remind him of Noriega's help for the Contras. "If you have the hearings," Abrams is reported to have told Helms, "it'll alienate them. It will provoke them and they won't help us with the Contras."⁸³¹

When the hearings did take place, the gap between Helms and the administration was notable. Abrams, while accepting the senator's concern about Noriega's relationship with Castro, nevertheless concluded 'we [the United States] have never lacked a sympathetic hearing for our views from Panama's Government.' More importantly, he continued, the bilateral consensus on U.S. military forces in Panama was 'notable and beneficial'. When pressed on the names, provided by Helms' staff contacts in the Panamanian opposition, of prominent drug dealers associated with Noriega, U.S. officials pleaded ignorance. Abrams would only note that the Reagan administration was 'aware and deeply troubled by persistent rumors of corrupt, official involvement of Panamanians in drug trafficking.'⁸³² The senator also managed to force the administration to reveal National Security Agency phone intercepts from the day of

dedicated Ambassadors were quietly working within the system to expose the real Noriega regime. Their work exemplifies the most professional traditions of our diplomacy.' Jesse Helms (NC), "Providing Urgent Assistance For Democracy In Panama," *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 1614.

⁸³⁰ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 231.

⁸³¹ *Ibid.*, 237-238, and Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 177.

⁸³² U.S. Senate, Committee Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, *Situation in Panama*, 21 April, 1986, 39.

Spadafora's murder. "We have the rabid dog," a senior PDF officer had told Noriega, presumably referring to Spadafora. "What do you with a rabid dog?" the general replied.⁸³³

Helms' hearings received mixed reviews. On the one hand, he was the only senator present on 10 March, while only two colleagues – senators Zorinsky and Trible – attended the 23 April session. Lawmakers were not yet inclined to join Helms in his Panama inquisition, while outside Congress, his criticism of Noriega and the United States' relationship with the Panama was treated with a great deal of scepticism by those who saw it as little more than an attempt to subvert the Canal Treaties. Various national media outlets, all committed to the treaties, criticised Helms for disingenuously using allegations of drug trafficking and human rights violations for his own anti-treaties agenda. The *Washington Post* described it as a 'cynical cultivation of instability in Panama', while the *Chicago Tribune* said Helms' suggestion that the treaties might be re-examined was 'as dumb and as extreme an idea as was the suggestion by law enforcement officials in the 1970s that the general be assassinated.'⁸³⁴

Yet, at the same time, the senator's hearings did prompt renewed attention on Panama policy. Seymour Hersh, whose 22 June *New York Times* article further exposed many of the issues surrounding Noriega's government, cited the senator's interest as an important causal factor in his investigation.⁸³⁵ *The New York Times* itself lauded Helms for having 'usefully underlined' the questions surrounding Noriega's activities.⁸³⁶ Panama's ambassador to the United States was sufficiently worried by

⁸³³ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 239.

⁸³⁴ "Tales of Panama," *Washington Post*, 24 June, 1986, A18, and "The man astride the Panama Canal," *Chicago Tribune*, 27 June, 1986, 16.

⁸³⁵ Seymour Hersh, "Panama Strongman Said to Trade in Drugs," *The New York Times*, 12 June, 1986, A1.

⁸³⁶ "Alarm About Panama," *The New York Times*, 24 June, 1986, A26.

Helms' actions that he condemned the senator by name in a robust defence of Panama's reputation, published in *The New York Times* shortly after the Spadafora hearings.⁸³⁷

Thus, while the accusations did not fully persuade Congress, the administration, or the media of the need to re-evaluate the country's relations with Noriega, the senator nevertheless opened Panama policy up to a level of scrutiny not seen since the debate over the Canal Treaties a decade earlier. From now on, Noriega's name became associated with drug trafficking and human rights abuses. John Weeks and Phil Gunson, looking back on the role played by the Spadafora case in Noriega's demise, believed Helms' meeting with Hugo's brother was the first example of Banquo's ghost returning to haunt the general.⁸³⁸ In the aftermath of that meeting, Helms made sure that Banquo's ghost would remain centre-stage.

In September 1986, Helms' efforts to isolate Noriega and pressure the administration over its Panama policy dovetailed with his interest in intelligence reform. By this point, Helms' suspicions about the CIA's anti-communist credentials had reached their peak. In Central America, the agency's involvement with Duarte's 1984 presidential campaign and its animosity toward Pastora and other Helms-approved factions of the Contra movement infuriated the senator. In August 1986, this animosity increased dramatically. Helms was incensed by charges that his office had leaked classified intelligence about U.S. surveillance of Chile's military. Helms accused the CIA and the State Department of "trying to discredit me" as

⁸³⁷ Dominador Kaiser Bazan, "Attack on Panama is Anonymous and Unproved," *The New York Times*, 15 July, 1986, A28.

⁸³⁸ John Weeks and Phil Gunson, *Panama: Made in the USA* (London: Latin America Bureau, 1991), 60. The three most detailed narratives of U.S.-Panamanian relations in this period all give substantial attention to the Helms meeting as a turning point. See Kevin Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story* (New York: Touchstone, 1991), 47-48, Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 236-249, and Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 176-177.

part of a wider attempt to undermine the Pinochet government and its supporters.⁸³⁹

Helms' frustration with the CIA was not limited to its performance in Latin America. He had grown disillusioned with its entire outlook on the Cold War. The previous October, he had written to President Reagan expressing concern about the agency's 'long-standing problem... regarding an apparent analytical bias which continuously under-estimates Soviet intentions and capabilities.' According to experts, Helms told Reagan, the CIA might well be 'pro-Soviet.'⁸⁴⁰ At the very least, he told Rowland Evans and Robert Novak in September 1986, the agency was a 'loose-cannon'. In an oft-used criticism, Helms called the CIA an 'operating arm' of the State Department.⁸⁴¹ This collusion undermined the United States' international agenda, Helms argued, and the two departments were "'kicking our friends in the teeth around the world and cozying up to the emissaries of the Soviet Union.'"⁸⁴²

Helms' solution was to amend the Intelligence Authorization Act, which acted as a key mechanism for congressional oversight of the intelligence community. Initially proposing thirty amendments, all designed to subject the CIA to more intense scrutiny and expand the role of

⁸³⁹ Joanne Omang, "CIA Said to Hold Information On Helms, Pinochet Bugging," *Washington Post*, 27 September, 1986, A1, "Helms denies Chile leaks, requests probe," *Chicago Tribune*, 12 August, 1986, 12, Steven V. Roberts, "Helms Assails Many Over Chile," *The New York Times*, 8 August, 1986, A9, and "FBI investigating Helms in leak of classified plans to Chile," *Chicago Tribune*, 3 August, 1986, 3.

⁸⁴⁰ Letter, Senator Jesse Helms to President Reagan, 2 October, 1985, ID340926, CO165, WHORM: Subject File, RRL.

⁸⁴¹ Transcript, Senator Jesse Helms, Rowland Evans, and Robert Novak, folder "Helms, Jesse A. (16)," WHORM: Alpha File, RRL, and Jesse Helms (NC), "The Nicaragua Resistance: Is It Being Sold Down The River?" *Cong. Rec.* 131 (1985), 6639-6640.

⁸⁴² Omang, "CIA Said to Hold Information," A1.

the hard-line Defense Intelligence Agency, Helms eventually reduced his demands to just two amendments after negotiations between his staff and aides to moderate Republican committee chairman David Durenberger.⁸⁴³ Helms' first addition to the bill – a classified provision – demanded the 'competitive analysis' of thirty-two Cold War issues. The second, which was introduced in public, required the CIA to report on Panamanian drug trafficking and corruption, as well as the Spadafora murder. Helms' insistence that the Panama amendment was one of the two that made the cut out of the original thirty indicated the importance he was now attaching to events in the Isthmus.

It was long-standing Senate tradition that members looking to amend intelligence legislation reached behind-closed-door agreements with the intelligence committee over their proposals.⁸⁴⁴ In openly amending the bill during floor discussion Helms therefore made a significant break from this established norm. His decision to do so encouraged a roll-call vote on his legislation and therefore a recorded, empirical measure of Senate opinion on the Noriega question. 'I hope that this rollcall vote', he said, 'will produce an overwhelming call by the U.S. Senate for the truth about Panama, whatever it is.'⁸⁴⁵ Of course, the publicity of open Senate deliberation allowed Helms to shape perceptions of this 'truth', and he spoke openly of the questions surrounding Spadafora's death, the PDF's involvement in arms and drugs smuggling, electoral fraud, and the forced resignation of Barletta. To add further negativity to Noriega's public image, the senator implied the Panamanian strongman was responsible for the plane crash that killed his predecessor, Omar Torrijos. Finally, in what would become a common theme of Helms' entrepreneurship, he brought Noriega explicitly into a Cold War context by emphasising the links between Cuba and Noriega. The general's 'longstanding ties with Cuba are well-known', Helms

⁸⁴³ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁴ Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 179.

⁸⁴⁵ Helms, "Intelligence Authorization Act," *Cong. Rec.* 132 (1986), 25813.

said, citing Hersh's June article as proof. Such ties demanded a response from the United States: 'I believe that we absolutely must ask ourselves whether this situation constitutes a national security threat to the United States if proven true.'⁸⁴⁶

His amendment was not without opposition, not least among members of the intelligence committee who feared it was redundant and potentially dangerous.⁸⁴⁷ Yet just as Kingdon has noted that entrepreneurs distribute their ideas across many forums so as to "soften up" the policy environment, so too did Helms spread a wide net of accusations against Noriega so as to maximise the chances of something sticking.⁸⁴⁸ The overlapping themes that Helms used offered one or more justifications for interested senators to support the amendments. There were those, like Ted Kennedy (D-MA), who were persuaded that Noriega's record of corruption and internal repression permitted them to support Helms out of humanitarianism and in order to promote democracy.⁸⁴⁹

At the same time, the legislation tied Panama policy more closely to the much wider national furore over drugs and their impact on American society. By 1986 such concern had reached record levels, prompting Congress to re-write almost all drug-related legislation and, critically, leading Reagan to explicitly link global narcotics trafficking with national security.⁸⁵⁰ The multi-faceted nature of Helms' criticism of Noriega thus

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid., 25807-25808.

⁸⁴⁷ For examples, see arguments by David Durenberger, Patrick Leahy, and George Cohen, "Intelligence Authorization Act," *Cong. Rec.* 132 (1986), 25812-25814.

⁸⁴⁸ Kingdon, *Agendas*, 127-131.

⁸⁴⁹ Ted Kennedy (MA), "Intelligence Authorization Act," *Cong. Rec.* 132 (1986), 25814.

⁸⁵⁰ Ted Galen Carpenter, *Bad Neighbor Policy: Washington's Futile War on Drugs in Latin America* (Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 29, and "Narcotics Security Decision Directive Number 221," *Narcotics and National*

increased his chances of constructing a broad Senate coalition in support of his ideas.

Helms also asserted congressional prerogatives that infused his actions whenever the executive's agenda did not meet his expectations or standards. Reporting requirements, which demand that the executive inform Congress of its actions on a specific topic or issue, allow for lawmakers to mobilise against policy should they disagree with the findings.⁸⁵¹ Until this point, the Reagan administration was not constrained in its relationship with Noriega, and this had helped maintain the low profile of U.S.-Panama relations for the first half of the 1980s. Despite the publicity of Helms' hearings and growing press coverage, the White House had deftly contained growing congressional scepticism of the United States' relationship with Noriega. Helms' amendment aimed, as he put it, to publicise the 'truth' about Panama and, consequently, make it harder for the executive to maintain its current approach.

Nevertheless, a shrewd executive branch can counter congressional institutionalism in the guise of reporting requirements. They do this by, as Lindsay notes, maintaining strict compliance with the letter of the law while ignoring its spirit. This had been useful for Helms and conservative allies with respect to the Contras, where the Reagan administration's third-party funding initiatives and the CIA's harbour mining programme were presented as entirely permissible under legislation enacted by Congress. The administration and its supporters argued in that case that because the relevant committees had been briefed about the mining, in a single sentence delivered by William Casey, the executive had fulfilled its

Security (NSC-NSDD-221), Federation of American Scientists Intelligence Resource Program, accessed 21 March, 2014, <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-221.htm>.

⁸⁵¹ Lindsay, "Congress, Foreign Policy, and the New Institutionalism," 287.

obligation to Congress.⁸⁵² In Panama, however, the senator found the tables turned. The CIA resisted the senator's intrusion upon its relationship with Noriega, and, when the agency published its Panama report a year later, it saw fit to set out only one and a half pages of findings. Helms was livid. The report 'was, in fact, a nonreport', he told colleagues. 'It was insulting in its deliberate disregard of the clear intent of the amendment adopted by the Senate and later enacted into law.'⁸⁵³

The agency's response to Helms was hardly surprising. William Casey publicly criticised the senator for micromanaging intelligence policy and reneging on legislative language agreed between the various parties. Casey and White House officials portrayed the broader support for Helms' amendments as reluctant pragmatism from senators desperate to pass an intelligence bill before Congress went into recess.⁸⁵⁴ Anonymous senators and their aides further fuelled this damaging anti-Helms narrative by suggesting to the press that Casey was correct in believing Helms would use this precedent as a stepping stone to rewrite greater portions of intelligence legislation in the future.⁸⁵⁵ It would become apparent, however, that while the CIA might have believed its half-hearted cooperation would foil Helms, it actually only served to fire congressional criticism of the administration one year later when the report was published.

This public acrimony between Casey and Helms spoke to the breakdown in the relationship between the executive and Helms over

⁸⁵² LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 333-337, and Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, 310-311.

⁸⁵³ Jesse Helms (NC), "Omnibus Trade And Competitiveness Act Of 1987," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 17780-17781.

⁸⁵⁴ Steven Engelberg, "Vote in Senate Supports Helms On C.I.A. Curb," *The New York Times*, 26 September, 1986, A1.

⁸⁵⁵ Steven Engelberg, "Conferees Reach Agreement on Bill for Intelligence Agencies," *The New York Times*, 2 October, 1986, A19.

Noriega. “You don’t understand”, Casey is reported to have told the senator in a heated phone call. “You are destroying our policy. There’s some things you don’t know about, things Noriega is doing for the United States.” Helms appeared open to persuasion – “Fine, come up and tell me about them”, he is said to have replied – but the CIA director was unwilling to follow through.⁸⁵⁶ It was evident that Helms’ continuing interest in Noriega was generating resistance toward the senator from a growing portion of the executive branch.

Helms’ actions in 1986 were important in setting the ball rolling against Noriega, but it is important not to exaggerate their impact. A significant faction of the national security apparatus – especially at the Department of Defense, CIA, and, to a slightly lesser extent, the State Department – remained convinced that Noriega was critical in the war against the Sandinistas. This group included several conservatives working with the senator to manage the fallout over Iran-Contra, but they did not share his concern that the United States’ relationship with Noriega was problematic. In autumn 1986, for example, Oliver North approved a campaign by public relations firm International Business Communications, which also worked on behalf of the Contras, to improve Noriega’s tarnished reputation. Two months later, North approached Jack Lawn, head of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), and offered to smooth matters over after hearing some DEA agents were investigating Noriega’s links to drug trafficking. The DEA, for its part, generally continued to laud Noriega for his cooperation in recent anti-drug operations, and sent a strong letter of commendation to Noriega as thanks for his help.⁸⁵⁷

⁸⁵⁶ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 253, and Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 179-180.

⁸⁵⁷ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 252-259, and Stephen Engelberg, “Dupes or Partners?: Noriega and the U.S.: A Decade of Deals,” *The New York Times*, 7 February, 1988, 1.

Claims by administration officials that Noriega was helping in the war on drugs outraged the senator. When the White House certified in April 1987 that Panama was fully cooperating with anti-drug efforts, Helms co-sponsored John Kerry's resolution of disapproval. It was a highly symbolic censure of the Reagan administration, despite the senator's claim that the White House merely offered a 'routine' approval of a decision actually made by the State Department. 'This Senator is not going to vote in favor of a certification that is a falsehood', he told colleagues, reminding them of numerous press reports linking the PDF and Noriega with drug trafficking. Panama had pulled out of negotiations over the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty aimed at money launderers, Helms added, and its banking system assisted drug traffickers because it was 'high on secrecy... and low on accountability'. The situation was 'made to order for criminals with large amounts of American cash from drug trafficking to launder.'⁸⁵⁸

To build pressure on the administration, Helms linked certification with the domestic war on drugs, questions over congressional credibility, and senators' electoral survival. In an echo of conservative tactics during the Panama Canal Treaties debate, Helms predicted voter backlash for those who supported the administration. 'Anybody who votes to table this joint resolution will be making a serious mistake', he said. 'I would hate to be running for re-election having voted to table the amendment. Senators who did so would be telling the voters that "I will bluster about the drug problem, but I won't do anything about it."' At the same time, he continued to press for greater integrity from his fellow senators. Failing to support its own drug legislation made 'wimps' of the Senate. 'If we do not start doing something beyond talking, it is going to bring down this society.'⁸⁵⁹

⁸⁵⁸ Jesse Helms (NC), "Disapproval Of Presidential Certification – Panama," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 7901.

⁸⁵⁹ Helms, "Disapproval Of Presidential Certification – Panama," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 7901.

Some senators dismissed Helms' bullish rhetoric, and criticised the resolution for its heavy-handed approach to Panama policy. Voting for disapproval was 'an easy vote', Chris Dodd said, 'because you will be attacking a general' rather than considering the issues at stake.⁸⁶⁰ Claiborne Pell cautioned senators that 'serious foreign policy implications' were involved, not least anti-drug cooperation. '[W]hile we can all agree that Mr. Noriega is no great hero or individual of whom we are particularly fond,' Pell said, 'we ought to recognize the fact that the Government of Panama has adopted new narcotics laws.'⁸⁶¹ By now, however, the war on drugs had become an overriding concern for many lawmakers, and the coalition centred on Helms and Kerry benefited. A motion to table Kerry's resolution was defeated 31-58, and the Senate subsequently disapproved the administration's certification of Panama.⁸⁶² It was an important sign of the growing congressional discontent over Panama policy, and became a milestone for Helms in pushing the Senate to the forefront of drug control policy.⁸⁶³

Obstacles still remained, largely because opponents of the measure were able to derail the Kerry resolution by delaying it until the time window allocated for implementation had elapsed. This helped Noriega hang on a little longer, although the critical factor lay in Panama. The country's civilian opposition, organised around the country's business community and young professionals, accepted Noriega's presence as a necessary, if unedifying, component of a longer-term strategy for restoring democracy in the country.⁸⁶⁴ Helms' efforts, though persuading growing

⁸⁶⁰ Chris Dodd (CN), "Disapproval Of Presidential Certification – Panama," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 7908.

⁸⁶¹ Claiborne Pell (RI), "Disapproval Of Presidential Certification – Panama," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 7900-7903.

⁸⁶² "Rollcall Vote No. 63 Leg," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 31-58.

⁸⁶³ Jesse Helms (NC), "Drug Certification," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 2862.

⁸⁶⁴ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 259.

numbers of senators, were not persuading ordinary Panamanians living under Noriega and the PDF to express their own dissatisfaction.

Noriega achieved that himself in mid-1987. At the start of June, he reneged on a promise to allow the PDF's second-in-command, Colonel Roberto Díaz Herrera, a graceful retirement. Díaz Herrera was associated with leftist elements in the PDF, and Noriega saw allowing his quiet retirement as an effective way of removing a potential threat to his rule. Noriega, however, suddenly changed his mind, and prepared to announce Díaz Herrera's dishonourable discharge. Furious at this betrayal, Díaz Herrera promptly attacked Noriega's record of criminality and political repression in a series of interviews in the Panamanian press.⁸⁶⁵ The accusations resonated with what Dinges describes as 'some forgotten reservoir of outrage in the Panamanian people,' and thousands of ordinary citizens took to the streets to protest. Their actions captured international attention and dramatically intensified the pressure on Noriega and the PDF.⁸⁶⁶

The timing of the protests was a twist of fate for Helms. It was during these middle days of 1987 that the details of Iran-Contra were being exposed to the American public during televised congressional hearings. Noriega's closest allies at the National Security Council, as well within the Defense and State Departments, were no longer in a position to help him. Oliver North was pushed out of the NSC, and William Casey, Noriega's most dependable ally in the Reagan administration, died the same weekend that Díaz Herrera launched his public attacks on the general. The very events

⁸⁶⁵ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 259-262, "Panama General Accused of Ousting Leader," *The New York Times*, 9 June 1987, A5, and "Panama Leader Accused of Role in Vote Fraud," *Washington Post*, 9 June, 1987, A18.

⁸⁶⁶ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 264, Stephen Kinzer, "Panama Calls State of Emergency After 4th Day of Violent Protests," *The New York Times*, 12 June, 1987, A1, Julia Preston, "Panama Riots Continue," *Washington Post*, 11 June, 1987, A25, and Julia Preston, "Panamanians Riot After Accusations," *Washington Post*, 10 June, 1987, A19,

that were causing Helms such consternation over Nicaragua served to strengthen his policy toward Panama.

Spurred by the protests, the Senate passed a resolution in late June that declared support for Panamanian democracy and human rights. As his colleagues attested, Helms was instrumental in assembling the legislation and its fifty-two co-sponsors (drawn from both sides of the aisle, and across the ideological spectrum).⁸⁶⁷ Using an expanding network of Panamanian opposition contacts, including the former Panamanian ambassador to the United States, Gabriel Lewis, Helms worked to assuage the doubts of those senators who remained unconvinced by his Panama policy. Unlike so many cases in the past, when Helms had been willing to stand alone and suffer defeat in order to rigidly defend his principles, here he was determined to work productively with his colleagues and win an overwhelming Senate consensus on Noriega. This was best illustrated in his acceptance of Chris Dodd's request that the measure be made a freestanding resolution.⁸⁶⁸ In doing so, Helms made a beneficial break from his customary strategy of using unsuitable legislative vehicles to further policy goals and shape public discourse.

The resolution was the clearest expression yet of Senate intent on Panama policy, and, in a roundabout manner, resulted in the State Department shifting its stance on Noriega toward the end of 1987. In the aftermath of the Senate's action, furious Panamanian crowds – widely reported to be public servants acting on government orders – attacked the U.S. embassy and U.S. Information Service buildings in Panama City. The incident persuaded Secretary of State George Shultz that Noriega could no

⁸⁶⁷ David Durenberger (MN), "Omnibus Trade And Competitiveness Act Of 1987," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 17769 and Steve Symms (ID), "Omnibus Trade And Competitiveness Act Of 1987," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 17769.

⁸⁶⁸ Jesse Helms (NC), "Omnibus Trade And Competitiveness Act Of 1987," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 17769.

longer be tolerated.⁸⁶⁹ The unrest also raised public awareness in the United States, including among conservatives, as the movement press began to pay closer attention to the instability in Panama. For example, it was only in late 1987 that *Human Events* began to criticise Noriega for his drug-trafficking, anti-democratic principles, and, predictably, the threat he posed to the Canal.⁸⁷⁰

Worse news for Noriega followed when, on 5 February 1988, two federal grand juries in Florida indicted him on drug trafficking charges. Once again Panama and Nicaragua policy intertwined in peculiar ways, as Helms found himself lauding the work of the U.S. attorney who had supervised the criminal prosecution of Oliver North. Helms, unsurprisingly, did not single out the attorney, Leon Kellner, for specific praise when he commented on the prospect of federal charges against Noriega.⁸⁷¹

For Helms, the indictments were a vindication of his lengthy personal crusade against the Panamanian dictator. '[F]or a decade I have tried to warn the American people about Noriega's activities', reminding colleagues of his 1978 comments about the general. His hearings into drugs and Panama, convened in 1984 when he chaired the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, had shown Panama to be 'a haven for drug traffickers, terrorists, and Mafia hit men.' 'I have conducted hearings, taken depositions, and held personal interviews with scores of Panamanians, and directed staff to make thorough investigations', Helms told colleagues.⁸⁷²

⁸⁶⁹ Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, 171.

⁸⁷⁰ Allan C. Brownfield, "The Panama Canal Treaties Swindle (Book Review)," *Human Events*, 24 October, 1987, 16, and Priscilla L. Pratt, "Popular Unrest Threatens Panama's Leftist Dictator," *Human Events*, 3 October, 1987, 10.

⁸⁷¹ Jesse Helms (NC), "General Noriega Of Panama Likely To Be Indicted," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 1073-1074.

⁸⁷² Helms, "General Noriega Of Panama Likely To Be Indicted," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 1073.

'Events', he concluded, 'have proven this Senator was fully justified in his investigations of the Panamanian dictator and his role in international drug trafficking.'⁸⁷³

The indictments became a cornerstone of a conservative effort to settle old scores over Panama. Writing shortly after the indictments were issued, M. Stanton Evans pointed to his columns on the issue during the Carter administration, as well as the activities of Helms, Bob Dole, and John Murphy.⁸⁷⁴ Helms himself stated, 'Those of us who have been pointing this [Panama's drug trafficking] out for many years were finally proven right.'⁸⁷⁵

The senator, however, refused to see the indictments as a final victory over Noriega. Unwilling to let the Reagan administration off the hook, he criticised unnamed members of the government who had 'supported Noriega for too long.' The long-term damage caused by this alliance could be disastrous, Helms said, and Americans 'must pray that it is not too late to restore freedom to the Panamanian people.' Even as he expressed tempered approval for the apparent unity now developing among policymakers, he cautioned, 'it is crucial that we proceed to do whatever may be necessary to return Panama to the people of Panama.'⁸⁷⁶

Indeed, the newfound consensus was by no means cemented. The White House had moved closer to Helms' position by accepting the indictments, but its position was motivated largely by the political need of appearing committed to the war on drugs during a presidential election

⁸⁷³ Jesse Helms (NC), "Noriega's Dismissal," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 2293.

⁸⁷⁴ M. Stanton Evans, "How Panama Drug Traffic Was Covered Up," *Human Events*, 2 April, 1988, 8.

⁸⁷⁵ Helms, "Drug Certification," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 2862.

⁸⁷⁶ Helms, "General Noriega Of Panama Likely To Be Indicted," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 1074.

year.⁸⁷⁷ Outside the West Wing, officials continued to send mixed signals. Law enforcement officials denied the indictments were part of an administration strategy to force Noriega's resignation, and sources among foreign policy agencies quickly criticised the charges as harmful to U.S. policy in Panama.⁸⁷⁸ Bureaucratic infighting split the DEA into two factions, as one group of agents continued to support Noriega because of his assistance in several of their operations while a separate group, involved in the investigation, supported the indictments.⁸⁷⁹

Perhaps the most public example of bureaucratic factionalism, however, and one which fuelled Helms' suspicion of the department, occurred at State. In the immediate aftermath of the indictments, the State Department rejected its own drug unit's recommendation that Panama be certified despite unsatisfactory progress on combating drug trafficking.⁸⁸⁰ Though the department was making exactly the decision Helms wanted, the senator was not satisfied. He used the indecision among officials to attack State's record and blame it for the incoherence in the nation's anti-drugs strategy. 'It is well known that the drug certification is determined by the State Department', he argued, though he failed to note that the final recommendation ignored Defense and Justice Department advice.⁸⁸¹

⁸⁷⁷ Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, 173, and Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 294.

⁸⁷⁸ Elaine Sciolino, "Doubts on Panama: Noriega Indictment Muddles Efforts By U.S. to Ease General From Power," *The New York Times*, 6 February, 1988, 5, Joe Pichirallo, "Indictments Depict Noriega As Drug-Trafficking Kingpin," *Washington Post*, 6 February, 1988, A1, and Joe Pichirallo, "Panama's Noriega Indicted in U.S.," *Washington Post*, 5 February, 1988, A1.

⁸⁷⁹ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 295.

⁸⁸⁰ Judith Havemann, "Report Rejects Penalizing Panama," *Washington Post*, 21 February, 1988, 27, and Elaine Sciolino, "Draft U.S. Report on Drugs Urges No Penalty for Panama or Mexico," *The New York Times*, 20 February, 1988, 1.

⁸⁸¹ Sciolino, "State Department Asks Reagan to Penalize Panama over Drug Trafficking," A12.

The discontent over Panama that Helms had helped foster was important in the State Department's decision to overturn its own internal recommendation. 'I wouldn't deny that there were political realities on the Hill that were factored in', one anonymous official told the press.⁸⁸² Yet the White House still resisted calls from Helms and Congress to impose more stringent sanctions on Panama, beyond the suspension of military and economic aid agreed upon the previous year. It was revealing of the importance of Noriega to the Reagan administration, but also of the power of policy momentum. Helms found his calls for full sanctions ignored by a president convinced that such action was excessive and counterproductive.⁸⁸³

It was not only Helms who was 'deeply concerned' by the president's refusal to consider moving beyond the mandatory sanctions.⁸⁸⁴ At a White House conference on drugs the day before the certification, lawmakers from across party lines urged Reagan to adopt a tougher approach to Noriega.⁸⁸⁵ On 3 March, when additional sanctions were proposed by the Panama coalition, members of the anti-Noriega group criticised Reagan's caution. Al D'Amato warned that one should not confuse 'caution with inaction', and that any delay in taking steps against Noriega threatened the 'battle for our youth and the very fiber of society.'⁸⁸⁶ Ted Kennedy, David Durenberger, and John Kerry added their support to calls for swift and decisive action against the general.

⁸⁸² Helms, "Drug Certification," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 2862.

⁸⁸³ John M. Goshko and Lou Cannon, "Reagan Finds Panama Lax On Drugs," *Washington Post*, 1 March, 1988, A1.

⁸⁸⁴ Helms, "Drug Certification," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 2862.

⁸⁸⁵ George Curry, "U.S. censures Panama, but congressmen want more," *Chicago Tribune*, 2 March, 1988, 12.

⁸⁸⁶ Alfonse D'Amato (NY), "Statements On Introduced Bills And Joint Resolutions," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 3171-3172.

The Panama coalition's solution to administration foot-dragging was to propose an import-export ban, suspension of air travel between the U.S. and Panama, and a halt to the transfer of funds between depository institutions in both countries. Helms, who co-sponsored the sanctions alongside D'Amato, Kerry, Kennedy, Durenberger, Bob Graham (D-FL) and Howell Heflin (D-AL), framed the measures as a populist response to Noriega's anti-democratic and criminal policies in the Isthmus. 'We would not propose these sanctions', Helms argued, 'unless we sincerely believed that the people of Panama are ready to make the required sacrifice in order to regain their freedom.' Panamanians, he added, 'are tired of waiting to see where the United States stands. They want Noriega out, and they want their country back.'⁸⁸⁷ Kerry concurred, remarking that the bill aimed 'to restore... democracy for a people who want it.'⁸⁸⁸

Lingering in the background, however, were continuing tensions over the Canal. Moderate and liberal members of the Panama coalition were quick to push back on suggestions that their activities were linked to the Carter-era treaties. When Howell Heflin, a conservative Democrat, argued the bill should prompt Senate reconsideration of the treaties, John Kerry and Al D'Amato quickly opposed the idea. 'This is not about the Canal Treaty,' Kerry argued.⁸⁸⁹ Yet growing anti-Noriega sentiment acted as a rallying point for those, like Helms, who refused to accept that the planned handover of the Canal in 2000 was inevitable. Now, even as he continued to lead the anti-Noriega coalition in the Senate, he worked with conservatives to renew the campaign to repeal the treaties. It became clear that the substantial progress Helms had enjoyed in his compromise strategy was

⁸⁸⁷ Helms, "Statements On Introduced Bills And Joint Resolutions," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 3174.

⁸⁸⁸ John Kerry (MA), Statements On Introduced Bills And Joint Resolutions," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 3175.

⁸⁸⁹ Kerry, "Statements On Introduced Bills And Joint Resolutions," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 3175.

increasingly challenged by his commitment to the pre-existing movement conservative principle of retaining the Canal. What emerged was a conflict between pragmatism and principle, as the senator proved unable to resist the urge to re-open his fight against the treaties.

Until late 1987, when the Reagan administration began to toughen its rhetoric on Noriega, Helms had shown a surprising level of caution on the issue. His comments during the Spadafora hearings that Noriega's complicity in drug trafficking and political repression might suggest the need for a re-examination of the 1978 agreements were not repeated for a number of months. He talked briefly in October 1986 of the State Department's decision to proceed with plans for a new sea-level canal (against all 'sound work done by experts in the field'), but that constituted his only Senate commentary on the issue.⁸⁹⁰ When Helms came to justify his disapproval of certification the following April, he subtly inserted the Canal into the debate by pointing to a *Reader's Digest* article on Noriega entitled "Will This Man Control the Panama Canal?" Yet while he described it as 'an enlightening article', he avoided any direct pronouncement on the treaties at that time, too.⁸⁹¹

In October 1987, however, the temptation to associate the ongoing anti-Noriega campaign with the Canal became too much. Helms joined Steve Symms in introducing a resolution calling for the Canal Treaties to be voided. Helms and Symms were careful to frame the legislation primarily on legal grounds, claiming the 1977 agreement was void because Panama did not accept the DeConcini Reservation that had made clear the United States could act to protect the Canal if necessary. Yet the Idaho conservative argued that the resolution was, in a broader sense,

⁸⁹⁰ Jesse Helms (NC), "Panama Canal: Future Policy Determination," *Cong. Rec.* 132 (1986), 27672-27683.

⁸⁹¹ Jesse Helms (NC), "Disapproval Of Presidential Certification – Panama," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 7901.

necessitated by Noriega's authoritarianism and criminality.⁸⁹² Though Helms spoke only on the legality of the 1977 treaties – 'I believe it to have been an illegal and unconstitutional act', he claimed, and a deal which the Senate was 'snuckered' into – his endorsement of the Symms resolution undercut suggestions by Republican staffers that anti-Noriega initiatives had nothing to do with the Canal Treaties.⁸⁹³ The Symms amendment, and Helms' vote against a measure to table it, were picked up by *Human Events*, as the magazine began to draw ever closer links between Noriega's fate and the future of the Canal treaties.⁸⁹⁴

It was a fine line for Helms. Talking about the Canal Treaties provided opponents ammunition to question his motives on Panama and open ideological fissures within the broader anti-Noriega coalition. In March, during Senate discussion on sanctions against Panama, Helms did not remark on the treaties or comment on Heflin's calls to re-examine the agreements. Indeed, the bill contained language specifically reaffirming the treaties. Nevertheless, the senator appeared comfortable switching rapidly between the two camps, as, the very next day, Helms proposed two amendments to the intelligence authorisation act calling for the abrogation of certain provisions of the 1977 agreements because of Panama's delay in extraditing Noriega.

The first of these proposed that Reagan consider extracting American dependents and halt the base closures and troop withdrawals agreed under the Canal Treaties unless Noriega was extradited. The second, which Helms

⁸⁹² Steve Symms (ID), "Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Year 1988," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 26458-26459.

⁸⁹³ Jesse Helms (NC), "Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Year 1988," *Cong. Rec.* 133 (1987), 26460-26461, and Nathaniel Sheppard, "U.S. distancing itself from Panama's strife," *Chicago Tribune*, 16 August, 1987, 27.

⁸⁹⁴ "Rethinking Panama Canal Giveaway," *Human Events*, 7 November, 1987, 22.

outlined but never introduced, added a demand for democratic government in Panama alongside Noriega's transfer to U.S. custody. Neither amendment received co-sponsors, but this was irrelevant. Helms was not seeking to build a genuine legislative coalition behind these measures, as he was in other parts of the Panama debate. Instead, as he admitted after parliamentary tactics repeatedly delayed his efforts, he only wanted a rollcall: 'I have been here for 4 hours, for one purpose: Trying to get a vote on an amendment.'⁸⁹⁵

In particular, Helms wanted his colleagues placed once more on the record over the Panama Canal Treaties. The amendments, he told colleagues, 'would allow Senators who were not here on April 18 1978... an opportunity to express their view on the wisdom or lack of it in turning over the Panama Canal Zone to Panama'. It would also permit those who were present in 1978 'to assess the correctness of the decision they made, one way or another, on that crucial day in Senate history.'⁸⁹⁶ The senator and other movement conservatives were convinced that support for the Panama Canal Treaties remained an electoral liability, and as in this case, never ceased to remind colleagues of the defeats many pro-treaty senators suffered after the 1978 vote. Placing current rivals on record as supporting the original treaties thus provided a ready-made attack strategy in future electoral battles.

At the same time, Helms believed that changing circumstances in Panama necessitated a new approach to the treaties. Helms was careful to deny his amendments affected the treaties, arguing they merely took 'precautionary steps to defend our vital national interests in the Panama Canal and to encourage Panama to extradite General Noriega to the United States for trial.' This was true, to the extent that his amendments were

⁸⁹⁵ Jesse Helms (NC), "Cloture Motion," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 3371.

⁸⁹⁶ Jesse Helms (NC), "Intelligence Oversight Act," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 3346.

merely suggestive, not prescriptive. Yet Helms failed to maintain his message discipline. He reminded colleagues that a well-established custom of international relations allowed for treaties to be terminated in the event of changed circumstances. Noriega's recent indictment, the senator pointed out, 'certainly qualifies as a changed circumstance.' Helms declared bluntly that 'Government of Panama is clearly unstable and totally incapable of defending the canal', and therefore endangered vital U.S. security interests.⁸⁹⁷ A rollcall vote would force senators to agree or disagree with this argument.

Without support, even from movement conservatives, Helms was hopelessly isolated on this approach. Outmanoeuvred by David Boren's perfecting amendment – 'I recognize the parliamentary procedure', Helms confessed. 'I have used it myself when I did not want an amendment to be even considered by the Senate' – Helms' efforts were further hampered by a bipartisan cloture motion that cut off debate. The senator defiantly proposed to stay in the chamber until his amendment was voted on, but though the second amendment was introduced on 15 March, the Senate took no further action.⁸⁹⁸ At a time when pressure on Noriega was intensifying rapidly, with the administration increasingly supportive of efforts to remove the general, Helms' efforts to bring up the Canal Treaties was an unwelcome intrusion upon this consensus.

Helms' strategy on the Canal, however, fitted with a broader conservative effort that peaked in 1988 with the movement's resurgent campaign to suspend parts, or all, of the treaties. Conservatives looked to capitalise on the growing public awareness of the Noriega problem and the administration's belated recognition of the Panamanian's threat to regional security issues. At the end of March, Robert Walker gained over seventy co-sponsors for his legislation in the House that proposed renegotiating the

⁸⁹⁷ Helms, "Intelligence Oversight Act," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 3348.

⁸⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3347-3372.

treaties in order to allow for a permanent presence of U.S. troops in Panama and independent military action in defence of the Canal.⁸⁹⁹ In mid-April, Connie Mack introduced a resolution calling for withdrawal from the treaties.⁹⁰⁰ In the Senate, Chic Hecht was joined by Symms and Texas Republican Phil Gramm in proposing that the 1977 agreements be suspended until Noriega and others involved in drug trafficking relinquished control of Panama's government.⁹⁰¹

Despite this distinctively conservative agenda, Helms continued to work effectively in the wider Senate anti-Noriega coalition. By the end of March, in a legislative entrepreneurship blitz, he had co-sponsored three multi-ideological resolutions over Panama. The first, which passed 92-0, called for immediate steps to hasten the transition toward democracy.⁹⁰² The second, accepted 92-1, called on Reagan to consider denying Noriega's government U.S. credit and to hold in escrow funds due to be transferred to Panama.⁹⁰³ The third, accepted on a voice vote, proposed that American employees be able to shop at U.S. military bases because of safety concerns in Panama.⁹⁰⁴ The breadth of support for these proposals starkly contrasted Helms' anti-treaties work with his more productive anti-Noriega efforts.

⁸⁹⁹ Robert Walker (PA), "Proposed Renegotiation Of Panama Canal Treaties," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 5875.

⁹⁰⁰ Connie Mack (FL), "Abrogate The Panama Canal Treaty," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 7010.

⁹⁰¹ Chic Hecht (NE), "Statements On Introduced Bills And Joint Resolutions," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 16361-16362.

⁹⁰² "Transition To Democracy In Panama," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 5259-5269, and "Rollcall Vote No. 74 Leg.," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 5268.

⁹⁰³ "Panamanian Economic Sanctions," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 6046-6048, and "Rollcall Vote No. 84 Leg.," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 6048.

⁹⁰⁴ "Permitting Certain Employees Of The Panama Canal Commission Privileges At Commissary And Exchange Stores In The Republic Of Panama," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 6048.

Helms was also increasingly vocal about 'Cubanisation' in Panama; that is, Noriega's gradual alignment with Castro. It was a term coined for the Panamanian context by Al D'Amato, after reports in the press suggested Cuban troops had fired upon American soldiers near the Canal.⁹⁰⁵ No evidence existed to back up the claims, apart from the belief among U.S. troops in the country that Cuban special forces had been operating for some time in the Isthmus.⁹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Helms seized upon the incident, concluding, 'the armed forces of one or more of the countries named in the presently pending amendment, probably Soviet-controlled Cubans, may have penetrated Canal defense areas manned by United States troops and may have actually engaged United States troops in combat.'⁹⁰⁷

Prior to this, the link between Noriega and communism had been difficult to sustain. Close U.S. intelligence relations with the Panamanian, especially William Casey's praise, undermined the argument.⁹⁰⁸ After Casey's death and the collapse of the Contra programme, however, Helms could comment without fear of contradiction from the administration. In May, Helms tested the Senate's acceptance of the Cubanisation theory by introducing an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act. The senator's proposal prohibited U.S. funding for the Combined Canal Defense Board, set up by the 1977 treaties in order to co-ordinate protection of the waterway, unless the president certified that no Cuban, Nicaraguan, or Soviet troops were present in Panama (or until Noriega was removed from office). Repeating D'Amato's claim that increasing Cubanisation of Panama

⁹⁰⁵ Alfonse D'Amato (NY), "Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome Research And Information Act," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 9304.

⁹⁰⁶ Storer Rowley, "U.S. tangles with shadowy foe in Panama," *Chicago Tribune*, 3 April, 1988, 1.

⁹⁰⁷ Jesse Helms (NC), "Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome Research And Information Act," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 9305.

⁹⁰⁸ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 233.

was 'a growing reality', Helms argued that the Senate must face the issue if the administration, and particularly the Defense Department, did not. "To this date," he told his audience, "I must sadly say the administration has not been willing to take a firm stand against Noriega and the Cubanization of Panama, nor in my judgment to face up to the hard facts."⁹⁰⁹

The decision to target the Defense Board, a provision of the 1977 agreements, explains why Helms' initiative lacked the bipartisan support found elsewhere in the anti-Noriega coalition. It only received co-sponsorship from two of his colleagues, Bob Dole and Strom Thurmond – both veterans of the fight against the Canal Treaties. As Sam Nunn, chair of the Armed Services Committee, noted, Panama's government could well use the threat to the treaties as a means of exploiting anti-American sentiment. Moreover, Nunn added, cutting off funding to a key component of the Canal's defence framework would threaten the security of the waterway.⁹¹⁰ Yet when Helms came down on the pragmatic side of the equation, and reworded the amendment so that it permitted the president to continue funding defence measures for the waterway, not one senator opposed passage of the legislation. It was but a small example of the success the senator achieved on Panama policy when he accepted the limitations to a pure conservative agenda, and embraced a degree of moderation he had long criticised from other foreign policy-makers.

A Just Cold War Cause: Removing Noriega, 1989-1992

On 3 October, 1989, Major Moisés Giroldi, a senior officer in the Panamanian Defense Forces, launched a coup against Noriega. Believing he had the support of U.S. forces stationed in Panama, Giroldi and his fellow

⁹⁰⁹ Jesse Helms (NC), "National Defense Authorization Act," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 11114-11115.

⁹¹⁰ Sam Nunn (GA), "National Defense Authorization Act," *Cong. Rec.* 134 (1988), 11118.

plotters seized Noriega at the *Comandancia*, the PDF's headquarters, at around 9.00am. Though Giroldi's family were given protection at an American base, direct U.S. support failed to materialise, and Noriega's loyal Special Forces units bypassed small detachments of American troops deployed to block off routes to the *Comandancia*. Surrounded by pro-Noriega soldiers, Giroldi and his followers gave in. Five hours after his initial capture, Noriega was rescued and Giroldi, along with several coup leaders, executed.⁹¹¹ The coup marked the collapse of American hopes for a Panamanian solution to its Noriega problem, and led to scathing criticism of a Bush administration that appeared unable – or unwilling – to back its own tough rhetoric on supporting Panamanian efforts to oust Noriega.

It is doubtful that the events of 3 October would have been revealed to the American public as quickly, and in as much detail, without Helms and his regional information network. The senator was perhaps the most knowledgeable observer of the coup outside those actively participating in it. The rapid, frequently real-time, exchange of information between Helms' sources in both Panama and the United States allowed the senator to act as an issue leader throughout the coup and in the days that followed.

Within two hours of Giroldi and his forces taking control of the *Comandancia*, the senator's office was communicating with the rebel forces. For the remainder of the coup, his staff, led by DeMoss, was in direct phone contact with Giroldi. Using the information relayed to them from Panama City, Helms' staff charted live troop movements in the capital, and even spoke to Noriega at one point when the rebels put him on the line.⁹¹² This information was augmented by details received from senators D'Amato and Kerry, as well as former Panama ambassador to the U.S. Juan Sosa and consul officer, José Blandón.

⁹¹¹ There are several excellent summaries of the coup. See John Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 304-305, and Buckley, *Panama*, 197-211.

⁹¹² Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 326-327.

Between them, the anti-Noriega coalition were able to gather together sufficient details about the coup to provide the first in-depth press briefing on the matter, not the White House. Helms, who spoke first, outlined the situation by telling journalists assembled in the Senate Press Gallery that the rebels were in control and were looking to retire all PDF officers with over twenty-five years of experience. 'And this includes a guy named Noriega, thank the Lord', Helms added, with obvious delight. Helms then stepped aside to let D'Amato, Kerry, and Sosa speak further.⁹¹³

Critics later accused Helms and his colleagues of jumping to conclusions about the coup's success. The senator's statement was described the following day as appearing 'to have no basis in fact', and it was contrasted unfavourably with the administration's caution throughout the crisis.⁹¹⁴ This was unfair to Helms. At no point during the press conference did he, or any of his colleagues in the coalition, suggest their information was irrefutable. Their account represented 'only what we think we know', as Helms put it.⁹¹⁵ As rumours swirled around Washington, it was only natural that the senator's statement would add to the sense of hope that Noriega had been removed, but at the time Helms claimed no certainty about his information.

As long as the coup was proceeding, the senator and the Bush administration both called for Panamanians to oust Noriega. They publicly encouraged Giroldi and his followers, taking advantage of their media

⁹¹³ "Reactions to Attempted Overthrow of Noriega," 3 October, 1989, *C-Span*, accessed 10 December, 2013, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?9352-1/reactions-attempted-overthrow-noriega>.

⁹¹⁴ Ray Moseley, "Bush denies U.S. role in Panama uprising," *Chicago Tribune*, 4 October, 1989, 4.

⁹¹⁵ "Reactions to Attempted Overthrow of Noriega," 3 October, 1989, *C-Span*, accessed 10 December, 2013, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?9352-1/reactions-attempted-overthrow-noriega>.

exposure to engage directly with those in Panama. In his closing remarks at the press conference, Helms addressed the rebels: 'I want the people in Panama – rebels if you want to call them that – I want them to hang in there, because they are doing the right thing.'⁹¹⁶ Over at the White House, responding to questions from reporters during his meeting with Soviet defence minister Dmitry Yazov, President Bush remarked, 'in the hopes that it be conveyed instantly to Panama: We have no argument with Panamanian Defense Forces... if you can use all these cameras to get that message to the people of Panama, I really think it would be a good thing for peace.'⁹¹⁷ In an era of instant news, Helms, like the president, took advantage of the medium to seek immediate policy influence.

Yet the huge difference in their respective support for the PDF – Bush's comments held out an olive branch to Panama's military, something Helms did not do – augured poorly for a unified front over the coup. Indeed, when news of Noriega's escape reached Washington in late afternoon, any harmony evaporated instantly. The senator's information network now acted as the basis for his intense public criticism of the White House and the foreign policy bureaucracy. He was the first member of Congress to speak on the record about the events at the *Comandancia*, interrupting the Senate's discussion on national drug control policy to lament Noriega's escape. Using intelligence presumably received via DeMoss and Giroldi, the senator revealed that 'at the crucial moment during the coup attempt the United States apparently rejected overtures from the rebels to assist in their efforts to depose this present dictator.' Unable to decide on its own authority to take custody of Noriega, Helms said, the administration 'acted

⁹¹⁶ Ibid.

⁹¹⁷ "Exchange With Reporters on the Attempted Overthrow of General Manuel Noriega of Panama, 3 October, 1989," *Public Papers*, George Bush Library, accessed 10 April, 2014, http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=1002.

like a bunch of Keystone Cops running around bumping into each other.’ ‘I have never seen such confusion and contradiction,’ Helms concluded.⁹¹⁸

Two days later, after a personal investigation into what he called ‘the story of the tragic inaction of the United States... in the face of a strong plea from patriotic Panamanians for help’, Helms expanded on his initial account. Helms told colleagues that Noriega had been in custody for at least five hours and, critically, that Giroldi was eager to turn him over to the U.S. The rebels had phoned SouthCom at 9.00am to request assistance, but ‘received not the slightest encouragement’ from the U.S. military. SouthCom, Helms said, did not know its own authority, and the Joint Chiefs responded ‘that their decision was not to make a decision.’ The senator did not limit his criticism to the Department of Defence. The White House was too busy ‘wining and dining’ the president of Mexico to respond to Giroldi’s requests for help, and the State Department created a task force to monitor events but not act on them. U.S. government officials, Helms said, did not have information on the crisis and ‘some of them did not seem to care.’⁹¹⁹

Other members of Congress were also critical of the administration in the aftermath of the coup. Yet the detail provided by Helms and the intensity of his criticism propelled the senator to centre-stage. “‘The Helms Version’”, as the *New York Times*, called it, reverberated throughout reporting in the aftermath of the coup.⁹²⁰ News coverage quickly moved away from describing the Bush administration’s response to questioning it.

⁹¹⁸ Jesse Helms (NC), “Implementation Of The President’s 1989 National Drug Control Strategy,” *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 22965-22966.

⁹¹⁹ Helms, “Implementation Of The President’s 1989 National Drug Control Strategy,” *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 23424-23425.

⁹²⁰ “Panama Fiasco: The Helms Version,” *The New York Times*, 7 October, 1989, 23.

An increasing number of inside sources began to acknowledge executive confusion and disorganisation during the coup.⁹²¹

As the administration found itself facing significant criticism and questioning, it reacted by launching a campaign to undermine Helms' credibility.⁹²² The president's press secretary, Marlin Fitzwater, called the senator "full of it" for suggesting the rebels had asked for U.S. assistance. No request had been made, Fitzwater said, and Helms' staff "couldn't prove anything."⁹²³ Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney described Helms' account as "a bunch of hogwash" and his criticism of the administration "crazy".⁹²⁴ Even President Bush rejected Helms' argument, though in a rather more courteous manner. "I think the record will show that there was never a chance to have him [Noriega] handed over to us", the president declared.⁹²⁵

On the specifics of Helms' narrative, administration sources systematically refuted each claim. Girold's actions were not 'well coordinated and effective', as Helms argued, but badly planned,

⁹²¹ For examples of this coverage, see Thom Shanker and Elaine S. Povich, "Cheney dodges growing flak over uprising," *Chicago Tribune*, 6 October, 1989, 24, Lori Santos, "Bush Denies American Roles in Panama Coup," *Atlanta Daily World*, 5 October, 1989, 1, Timothy J. McNulty, "U.S. defends inaction in Panama uprising," *Chicago Tribune*, 5 October, 1989, 1, Andrew Rosenthal, "Bush Denies Roles," *The New York Times*, 4 October, 1989, A1, and Ann Devroy, "U.S. Keeps Troops on Sidelines," *Washington Post*, 4 October, 1989, A1.

⁹²² Buckley, *Panama*, 215.

⁹²³ Molly Moore and Joe Pichirallo, "Cheney: U.S. Was Willing to Take Custody of Noriega," *Washington Post*, 6 October, 1989, A36.

⁹²⁴ Steven Engelberg, "G.I. Duty In Panama," *The New York Times*, 6 October, 1989, A1.

⁹²⁵ Maureen Dowd, "Bush, Under Fire, Defends Role in Panama Crisis," *The New York Times*, 7 October, 1989, 3.

disorganised, and never likely to succeed.⁹²⁶ The senator had described the Panamanians leading the coup as ‘courageous’ and ‘untainted by drug corruption’, with Girolodi ‘exactly the sort of person the United States should have been cultivating.’⁹²⁷ The administration, led by Cheney, instead declared that Girolodi was “‘a noted confidant, crony of Noriega’s’”, and “‘events might well have been a set up.’”⁹²⁸ The coup plotters only wanted Noriega’s resignation and internal exile, said administration sources, and were not, as Helms claimed, eager to turn the general over to the U.S.⁹²⁹ The low-key American response to the coup reflected President Bush’s judicious caution about involving U.S. forces in such an uncertain environment. “‘It’s easy to be an armchair general,’” said Secretary of State James Baker.⁹³⁰

Later accounts revealed the senator’s narrative to be far closer to reality.⁹³¹ Helms piously called it a ‘mystery’ as to how ‘one obscure U.S. Senator’ could put together a ‘more complete and more accurate account’

⁹²⁶ Helms, “Implementation Of The President’s 1989 National Drug Control Strategy,” *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 22965, Joseph B. Treaster, “Account of Plot,” *The New York Times*, 5 October, 1989, A14, Thom Shanker, “Noriega’s fate split coup leaders,” *Chicago Tribune*, 11 October, 1989, 1, and Elaine Sciolino, “U.S. Says Leaders Of Panama Revolt Were In Disarray,” *The New York Times*, 11 October, 1989, A1.

⁹²⁷ Helms “Implementation Of The President’s 1989 National Drug Control Strategy,” *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 22965, and Helms, “Implementation Of The President’s 1989 National Drug Control Strategy,” *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 23426.

⁹²⁸ David Hoffman and Ann Devroy, “U.S. Was Caught Off Guard by Coup Attempt,” *Washington Post*, 6 October, 1989, A33, and David Hoffman and Joe Pichirallo, “Rebels Held Noriega for Hours,” *Washington Post*, 5 October, 1989, A1.

⁹²⁹ Andrew Rosenthal, “Bush Denies Role,” *The New York Times*, 4 October, 1989, A1, and Hoffman and Pichirallo, “Rebels Held Noriega for Hours,” A1.

⁹³⁰ Hoffman and Pichirallo, “Rebels Held Noriega for Hours,” A1.

⁹³¹ The most comprehensive account of the coup is found in Buckley, *Panama*, 197-218.

than the White House based only on open sources.⁹³² Of course, the senator knew exactly how it had been achieved. He readily admitted, in looking back on his political career, that his staff's information network was designed to provide him with the facts from trustworthy sources so that he would not have to rely on the U.S. government for information.⁹³³

The Giroldi coup vindicated this approach, particularly as the White House conceded its own network had been defective. Its complicated multi-agency intelligence reporting system led to “fast and furious and contradictory” messages being transmitted. “[N]one of the [administration’s] sources were that good anyway”, said one senior official, and result was a “confused” bureaucracy.⁹³⁴ As a result, as Helms delighted in reminding his colleagues, the administration could only suggest that senators “turn on CNN” for information about the coup.⁹³⁵ In the most damning example of administration underperformance, John Sununu and Brent Scowcroft did not even know the *Comandancia* could be reached by telephone.⁹³⁶ Helms’ non-state network thus represented the benchmark for those seeking to bypass executive information gridlock in crisis scenarios.

⁹³² Helms, “Implementation Of The President’s 1989 National Drug Control Strategy,” *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 23424.

⁹³³ Helms, *Here’s Where I Stand*, 208.

⁹³⁴ Hoffman and Devroy, “U.S. Was Caught Off Guard by Coup Attempt,” A33, and Bernard Weinraub, “White House to Study Handling of Panama Crisis,” *The New York Times*, 6 October, 1989, A11.

⁹³⁵ 23425, and “Reactions to Attempted Overthrow of Noriega,” 3 October, 1989, accessed 10 December, 2013, *C-Span*, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?9352-1/reactions-attempted-overthrow-noriega>, and Helms, “Implementation Of The President’s 1989 National Drug Control Strategy,” *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 23425.

⁹³⁶ Buckley, *Panama*, 214.

Closely related to this was the manner in which an account derived from non-administration sources threatened the executive's message control. The White House was frustrated by Helms' ability to operate with his own information, which created concern about the potential damage the senator might inflict. The administration moved to reassert control of the information flow by calling Helms to the White House. The senator instead sent DeMoss and Jim Lucier, who rejected a demand from John Sununu and Brent Scowcroft to name all their sources.⁹³⁷ Then, when the exiled rebels and Giroldi's wife reached Florida, the White House instructed them not to embarrass the administration by divulging harmful details about the coup.⁹³⁸ Bush's advisers were particularly concerned that any complaints would reach Helms' office.⁹³⁹ Such fears were proved correct when, after being put in touch with the senator's office by sympathetic Panamanians in Miami, DeMoss travelled to Florida to meet with the group.⁹⁴⁰

To discourage future information entrepreneurship, the administration aimed at the messengers. Dick Cheney criticised those lawmakers who had contacted American and Panamanian sources on 3 October, saying they did not "contribute anything in a positive nature" and created "all kinds of problems".⁹⁴¹ Later, White House staff portrayed Helms' staff as uninformed and ineffective. "My personal feeling is that the Senator was badly misserved by his staff", said one official, who criticised

⁹³⁷ Elaine Sciolino, "Helms Keeps the Capitol Pot Boiling," *The New York Times*, 16 October, 1989, Buckley, *Panama*, 214, and Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 328.

⁹³⁸ Buckley, *Panama*, 211.

⁹³⁹ Stephen Engelberg, "Furor Over Panama: It's Helms vs. White House," *The New York Times*, 12 October, 1989, A12.

⁹⁴⁰ Buckley, *Panama*, 211-212.

⁹⁴¹ Shanker, "Noriega's fate split coup leaders," 14.

their information as factually inaccurate.⁹⁴² Officials even suggested that Helms might manipulate sources into altering the substance of information to suit his own purposes.⁹⁴³

Frustration at Helms' strategy added to bewilderment at why he had chosen to concentrate so intently on the coup and American response. Officials told the press they were "perplexed" by Helms' criticism, especially because of the close working relationship between President Bush and the senator. "The President has campaigned for him. We work with Jesse. He still comes over to see Bush", remarked one White House aide.⁹⁴⁴ Some officials, as has been noted, blamed the senator's staff for stirring up trouble. Helms quickly dispatched this reasoning. "I wouldn't take back one syllable", he retorted.⁹⁴⁵ Others, however, pinned the blame on Helms' ideology. "The most logical assumption", argued one official, "is ideological, just because that motivates him on so many things."⁹⁴⁶

The benefit of Helms' commitment to the historical record is that an examination of his speeches and legislative initiatives reveals an excellent picture of his thinking on the coup. It was no mystery as to why he engaged so closely with the rebellion. Helms believed that the United States had failed to act in support of democracy and hemispheric security. The 'arsenal of democracy', he told colleagues, had 'run out of firepower' if it could not support Panamanians crying out for help. At the same time, Bush's inaction brought into question the nation's credibility. Having been encouraged by the administration to oust Noriega over the course of several months, which Panamanians would now contemplate such action given the lack of

⁹⁴² Sciolino, "Helms Keeps the Capital Pot Boiling," A16

⁹⁴³ Engelberg, "Furor Over Panama: It's Helms vs. White House," A12.

⁹⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁵ Sciolino, "Helms Keeps the Capital Pot Boiling," A16.

⁹⁴⁶ Engelberg, "Furor Over Panama: It's Helms vs. White House," A12.

help from the United States when it really mattered? 'I am absolutely convinced that we ought to stop dillydallying and live up to all of what we have been saying, in all of our exhortations of rhetoric', said Helms.⁹⁴⁷

Helms' legislative record emphasised this point. On 3 October, only hours after Noriega's escape, Helms introduced an amendment that aimed to "provide for authority for the President to use the Armed Forces of the United States to secure the removal of Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega from his illegal control of the Republic of Panama."⁹⁴⁸ He feared the administration, and Congress, were sending mixed signals. 'I want the Senate of the United States to tell the President that he does have the authority' to remove Noriega, he said. 'We must keep alive the hope that one of these days those courageous people in Panama may attempt again to rid themselves of General Noriega. And we must be prepared to help.'⁹⁴⁹

Two days later, Helms again urged his colleagues to go on record in support of presidential action against Noriega. He proposed an amendment that would reaffirm (initially it had been to 'authorize') Bush's authority to use American military forces to bring Noriega to the U.S. for trial.⁹⁵⁰ Concerned about the possibility of a Gulf of Tonkin-style resolution, the Senate rejected Helms' proposals. A substitute, watered down to simply express support for the full range of presidential efforts to remove Noriega, passed ninety-nine to one. Helms voted for the amendment, but described his vote as 'equivalent to a passionate kiss of my sister'. 'If ever a mountain

⁹⁴⁷ Jesse Helms (NC), "Implementation Of The President's 1989 National Drug Control Strategy," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 23426-23438.

⁹⁴⁸ "Amendment No. 935 To Amendment No. 924," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 22965.

⁹⁴⁹ Helms, "Implementation Of The President's 1989 National Drug Control Strategy," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 22966.

⁹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 23426.

labored and brought forth a mouse, this is it', he said. 'Who can take exception to what is in it?'⁹⁵¹

Helms did not call for an outright invasion of Panama. Unlike Alfonse D'Amato, who told the Senate that Helms' amendment did not go far enough and 'maybe it is about time we said, we are going to have a war against an international drug cartel', Helms claimed only to want to reaffirm Bush's authority to intervene militarily. Yet it was impossible to miss the bellicosity in the senator's language. Helms claimed Noriega loyalists would never have reached the *Comandancia* had fully-armed American troops been effectively deployed, and he criticised the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs for his passivity during the coup. 'Something has been said about armchair generals', Helms noted, in reference to Baker's barbed comments, 'we do not need armchair generals at the Joint Chiefs of Staff.' All are entitled to their opinion, though 'it is difficult for this Senator to understand what the purpose of a military force is if it is not the defend U.S. vital interests.'⁹⁵²

Such talk reflected the senator's wider support for the use of force in pursuit of foreign policy goals, but in the specific context of Panama it also represented a more specific movement conservative demand for military action against Noriega. Commentators on the right frequently chastised Bush for his 'kinder, gentler' approach to the region, and since early 1989 had explicitly called for a far more robust response to Noriega's provocations.⁹⁵³ Helms' rhetoric, and amendments, fitted into this

⁹⁵¹ Ibid., 23456-23461.

⁹⁵² Ibid., 23424-23425.

⁹⁵³ "General Noriega's Retirement," *National Review*, 10 November, 1989, 15, "Central America Policy Clearly in Disarray," *Human Events*, 14 October, 1989, 1, "Consensus Growing For Noriega's Ouster," *Human Events*, 3 June, 1989, 5, "Bush Must Force Noriega's Ouster," *Human Events*, 20 May, 1989, 1, James C. Roberts, "Action Required at Our Central America Doorstep," *Human Events*, 6 May, 1989, 10-11, and "Noriega Terrorizing Americans in Panama," *Human Events*, 8 April, 1989, 6.

framework. Indeed, the American Conservative Union marked Helms' 5 October amendment as a benchmark vote for its annual congressional scorecard. Those who voted against Nunn's tabling amendment received a mark of approval from the national conservative body.⁹⁵⁴

The increasing militancy on Helms' part suggested a further widening in the divide between himself and the administration. The senator's message did not tally with an administration keen to emphasize its prudence, both publicly and privately. "I would hope that you recognize the restraint which the U.S. exercised with regard to the events of last week," the president wrote in a cable to all hemispheric leaders, "which took into account the sensitivities of you and your colleagues about U.S. behavior."⁹⁵⁵ Indeed, the incident had echoes of the *Sea Wolf* affair in 1975. The administration may well have been incompetent in its response to the coup, but Bush's caution, like President Ford's understated response to *Sea Wolf*, headed off the prospect of international condemnation over any aggressive U.S. response. Helms, though, could capitalise on the coup and the administration's inaction by resorting to a familiar "bomb throwing" strategy that did not translate into necessarily workable policy.

For Helms, the coup marked another high point in his Panama entrepreneurship. Administration officials spoke of the "serious problems" the senator had caused, not least in helping other members of Congress justify their opposition to the president on the coup.⁹⁵⁶ Meanwhile, commentators credited Helms with shifting the debate.

⁹⁵⁴ "1989 ACU Senate Vote Descriptions," *Ratings of Congress, 1989*, The American Conservative Union, accessed 20 September, 2013, http://www.conservative.org/ratingsarchive/uscongress/1989/desc_sen.html.

⁹⁵⁵ Cable, President Bush to All American Republic Diplomatic Posts, 14 October, 1989, ID164803, C0121, WHORM: Subject File, Bush Presidential Records, *GBL*.

⁹⁵⁶ Stephen Engelberg, "Furor Over Panama: It's Helms vs. White House," *The New York Times*, 12 October, 1989, A12.

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak said the senator had ‘raised far more hackles than the fiasco in Panama’, and forced the administration to resort to ‘political damage control.’⁹⁵⁷ *Human Events* praised Helms for pressing the administration over the coup.⁹⁵⁸ *The New York Times* concluded that the senator had achieved ‘considerable gravitational pull on the pace of official disclosures’ about Panama. He had ‘almost dictated that pace’ by his effective use of Senate speeches and media appearances.⁹⁵⁹ At the heart of this, as the paper also noted, was Helms’ ‘personal intelligence network’. He collected more detailed information more rapidly than the whole of the U.S. intelligence community put together.⁹⁶⁰ As DeMoss had told an angry John Sununu and Brent Scowcroft, “‘We have good sources. You don’t.’”

Two months later, on 20 December, President Bush authorised U.S. forces to invade Panama and arrest Noriega. Bush told the American people that intervention was required because of Panama’s ‘reckless threats and attacks upon Americans’.⁹⁶¹ Informing congressional leaders of his decision to launch combat operations, the president was more expansive. Military action was required, he said, in order ‘to protect American lives, to defend democracy in Panama, to apprehend Noriega and bring him to trial on the drug-related charges for which he was indicted in 1988, and to ensure the

⁹⁵⁷ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Who Lost Noriega?” *Washington Post*, 9 October, 1989, A21.

⁹⁵⁸ “Central America Policy Clearly in Disarray,” *Human Events*, 14 October, 1989, 1, and “Helms Scores Administration On Failed Panama Coup,” *Human Events*, 14 October, 1989, 3.

⁹⁵⁹ Engelberg, “Furor Over Panama,” A12.

⁹⁶⁰ Buckley, *Panama*, 211-214.

⁹⁶¹ “Address to the Nation Announcing United States Military Action in Panama, 20 December, 1989, *Public Papers*, George Bush Library, accessed 20 May, 2014, http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=1356.

integrity of the Panama Canal Treaties.⁹⁶² An overwhelming display of force quickly subdued PDF forces in Panama City, and, on 3 January, 1990, U.S. troops arrested Noriega after he surrendered outside the gates of the Papal Embassy in which he had taken refuge shortly after the invasion began. He was flown back to the United States and arraigned on drug charges in Florida, while in Panama, the PDF was disbanded and the government of Guillermo Endara began the task of rebuilding the nation.

Operation Just Cause is widely seen by scholars as a post-Cold War operation. The Bush administration, it is argued, launched military action to deal with non-traditional threats (drug trafficking), new imperatives (democracy promotion) and regional goals (Canal security and the protection of American citizens) without an anti-communist ideology as a fundamental framework.⁹⁶³ In an international environment in which the rapid decline of Soviet power had rendered anti-communism almost redundant by late 1989, Just Cause represented one of the initial contact points with Bush's new world order. Noam Chomsky, a strong critic of Bush's intervention in Panama, goes as far as to say the operation 'inaugurated' the post-Cold War era.⁹⁶⁴

⁹⁶² "Letter to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate on United States Military Action in Panama, 21 December, 1989," *Public Papers*, George Bush Library, accessed 20 May, 2014, http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=1364.

⁹⁶³ Glenn J. Antizzo, *U.S. Military Intervention in the Post-Cold War Era: How to Win America's Wars in the Twenty-First Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 41-68, Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy*, 357, Gilboa, "The Panama Invasion Revisited," 539, and Waltraud Queiser Morales, "US Intervention and the New World Order: Lessons from Cold War and Post-Cold War Cases," *Third World Quarterly* 15, No. 1, The South in the New World (Dis)Order (March, 1994), 78.

⁹⁶⁴ Noam Chomsky, "A View from Below," in *The End of the Cold War: Its Meaning and Implications*, ed. Michael J. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 144-145.

There is much to be said for these arguments. Few in the United States subscribed to the argument that Noriega was a communist ideologue, and reaction to Just Cause – whether supportive or critical – was largely devoid of red-hunting rhetoric. In Congress, the House passed a resolution backing the president’s decision ‘to further universal democratic ideals, to protect American lives and to bring to justice a major international criminal’, and individual expressions of support lauded Bush for his ‘demonstration of our Nation’s commitment to democracy’ and promotion of ‘the kind of political and economic environment in which democracy will thrive.’⁹⁶⁵ The national media, even press organs highly critical of the invasion, also focused on non-ideological justifications (in the sense of the Cold War) for the operation.

Yet, as John Lewis Gaddis notes, the Cold War ‘was many things to many people’.⁹⁶⁶ For Helms, Panama was not divorced from the grand East-West conflict. Noriega’s (supposed) communist ideology and support for communist guerrillas and drug traffickers in the hemisphere had made Panama a critical battleground in the senator’s Cold War. To deny Just Cause’s relevance to the Cold War is to deny the views of those, like Helms, who interpreted several key issues relating to Panama in Cold War ideological terms. Furthermore, it denies the views of a conservative movement who were not inclined to see late 1989 as the start of a new era in international affairs. “Don’t Bet Your Life the Cold War’s Over”, conservative activist Morton Blackwell told *Human Events*’ readers shortly

⁹⁶⁵ “Expressing the sense of Congress concerning Operation Just Cause in Panama (H. Con. Res. 262),” *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 1507, Strom Thurmond (SC), “Supporting The President’s Action In Panama And Recognising The Sacrifices Of Our Nation’s Servicemen And Servicewomen,” *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 1050, and William Broomfield (R-MI), “Sense Of Congress Concerning Operation Just Cause In Panama,” *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 1508.

⁹⁶⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, “The Cold War, the Long Peace, and the Future,” in *The End of the Cold War: Its Meaning and Implications*, ed. Michael J. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 21.

after combat operations began in Panama. Any euphoria over the decline of communism was 'extremely dangerous and irresponsible.'⁹⁶⁷

Noriega's drug trafficking is the best example to use. During the Bush administration, policy-makers increasingly depicted the hemispheric narcotics trade as an independent security issue, distinct from a wider communist threat.⁹⁶⁸ Yet, it was clear that Helms and a number of conservatives continued to focus on alleged 'narco-communist' connections at the heart of Noriega's rule. Only four months before Just Cause, the senator had described Panama's ruler as 'the intimate partner of Fidel Castro in drug-running, smuggling, and gun-running to Communist guerrillas', drawing a direct relationship between the war on drugs and anti-communist counterinsurgency that had been the foundation of U.S. Cold War policy in Central America.⁹⁶⁹ When Helms celebrated the end of a Panamanian government that had been 'in the hands of drug traffickers' right back to the days of Torrijos, he was also speaking of a significant triumph in his Cold War.⁹⁷⁰

Other conservatives saw Panama as a Cold War victory. When *National Review* praised the 'remarkable' success of Just Cause, it did so because Bush's action had removed 'a dope-dealing friend of Fidel.'⁹⁷¹ M. Stanton Evans, writing in *Human Events*, was optimistic that Noriega's arrest should lead to greater scrutiny of Castro and the 'considerable

⁹⁶⁷ Morton Blackwell, "Don't Bet Your Life the Cold War's Over," *Human Events*, 30 December, 1989, 10.

⁹⁶⁸ Carpenter, *Bad Neighbor Policy*, 48.

⁹⁶⁹ Jesse Helms (NC), "'Providing Urgent Assistance For Democracy In Panama,'" *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 1613, and Jesse Helms (NC), "More Generals Needed In The War On Drugs," *Cong. Rec.* 135 (1989), 17486.

⁹⁷⁰ Helms, "'Providing Urgent Assistance For Democracy In Panama,'" *Cong. Rec.* 136 (1990), 1613.

⁹⁷¹ "Just Cause: How Well Did We Do?" *National Review*, 22 January, 1990, 14, and "Our SOB," *National Review*, 22 January, 1990, 14.

network of Communists and pro-Communist forces in this hemisphere, busily dealing in weapons and laundered money' of which the former Panamanian general was a 'player'.⁹⁷² Evans' use of the present tense, and his comments in January 1990 that communist influence in the drug trade remained a 'substantive issue', gives an indication that Just Cause was very much part of the on-going Cold War narco-communist dynamic for movement conservatives.⁹⁷³

At the same time, democracy promotion in Panama had, for Helms and other conservatives, always been refracted through an anti-communism prism. Convinced that Noriega was a communist ideologue intent on imposing another Cuba – alongside Nicaragua – in Central America, supporting the democratic process in Panama had been a part of this framework. As *Human Events* argued, American intervention in Panama was 'an important signal to Stalinist dictators still reigning in this hemisphere' that the United States retained the capacity for swift and decisive action.⁹⁷⁴ At the same time, the magazine asked, if the Cold War was supposed to be over, why 'are the Communist nations worldwide, along with their acolytes, directing such vicious rhetoric against the U.S. policy in Panama?'⁹⁷⁵ Two months after Noriega's arrest, it declared that the outcome of Just Cause, as well as the Nicaraguan election, indicated the war on communism was being won. Yet there was still a long way to go. Removing Castro, it argued, was the essential task of the 'huge mopping up operation left to be accomplished.'⁹⁷⁶

⁹⁷² M. Stanton Evans, "It's Time to Expose the 'Cuban Connection,'" *Human Events*, 20 January, 1990, 8.

⁹⁷³ M. Stanton Evans, "No Issues for Conservatives? Nonsense," 13 January, 1990, 8.

⁹⁷⁴ "Bush's Panama Decision Right on the Mark," *Human Events*, 30 December, 1989, 1.

⁹⁷⁵ "Harsh Communist Reaction," *Human Events*, 30 December, 1989, 3.

⁹⁷⁶ "How Conservatives Can Topple Castro," *Human Events*, 10 March, 1990, 3.

Clearly it would be a mistake to overestimate the extent of Cold War rhetoric surrounding Just Cause. Many conservatives joined with liberals and moderates in seeing Bush's intervention as a new start for the United States' foreign policy. George Will, for example, while seeing Just Cause within the context of the 'climax' of the Cold War, nevertheless argued the operation 'turns a page in the book of U.S. history' and began a new chapter in 'the story of American attempts to comprehend the rights and responsibilities that come with the possession of great power and the enjoyment of democracy.'⁹⁷⁷

Yet, Gaddis' comment on the multi-faceted nature of the Cold War should give pause for thought. Helms and those movement conservatives who had seen Noriega through the lens of the Cold War did not jettison this framework during, or because of, Operation Just Cause. Indeed, they supported Just Cause precisely because they saw it as a chance to finally conclude a Cold War victory in Central America. It was a victory that they believed would provide a springboard for further assaults on the United States' enemies in the hemisphere, and suggested that the region's long Cold War, as indicated by Gilbert M. Joseph, is a viable framework for understanding its twentieth century struggles.⁹⁷⁸

⁹⁷⁷ George F. Will, "Good Neighbor Policy," *Washington Post*, 21 December, 1989, A29.

⁹⁷⁸ See Gilbert M. Joseph, "Latin America's Long Cold War: A Century of Revolutionary Process and U.S. Power," in *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgency Violence During Latin America's Long Cold War*, eds. Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 398-414.

Conclusion

“I realize that being remembered isn't important. What is important is standing up for what you believe to be right, hoping that you have done everything you can to preserve the moral and spiritual principles that made America great in the first place.”⁹⁷⁹

Jesse Helms never had the chance to deliver these remarks. Part of a proposed final speech to the Senate that his ailing health precluded, they were entered into the *Congressional Record* in October 2002, shortly before his retirement from public service. Though the senator never spoke the words, they are still a fitting conclusion to an account of his record in Central America – and, indeed, his legacy in both foreign policy and the modern conservative movement. Of course, Helms was being disingenuous in his suggestion he did not seek remembrance. After all, the senator was open and forthright throughout the period about his efforts to construct a historical record of his positions on Central America policy. It is important we do remember him, not just for what his principles were and what he did to fight for them, but for how his efforts shaped the fate of modern conservatism and U.S. foreign policy in Central America in an era when both were high on the nation's agenda.

At the heart of this thesis has been the idea of conflicting conservatisms: a contest within the post-war American right over how best to implement the basic principles of conservatism in the foreign policy sphere, following the work of, among others, James M. Scott, Julian Zelizer, William M. LeoGrande, Robert Mason, Colin Dueck and Sandra Scanlon. As a

⁹⁷⁹ “The farewell speech Helms never got to give,” *Charlotte Observer*, 5 July, 2008, accessed 7 September, 2014, http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2008/07/05/69277_the-farewell-speech-helms-never.html#.VA3mVucyEXw.

case study in understanding when, where, and how competition within the conservative movement occurred, Jesse Helms offers a wonderful opportunity to explore the details and nuances of this conflict. Several conclusions have been reached, while other avenues of future research have emerged. This conclusion will summarise each of these.

Firstly, this thesis has outlined one of the conservative foreign policies that Alan Brinkley alluded to when he spoke of the existence of distinctive conservative international agendas. On a basic level, the principles of Helms' foreign policy were easily identifiable. He was a crusading anti-communist, who advocated interventionist measures, while mostly steering clear of the delicate matter of American troop deployments. He proposed free-market solutions to the region's economic turmoil, though hated the notion that immoral, rampant capitalism might outweigh considerations of national security or prestige in international affairs. And he saw the protection of the Judeo-Christian tradition as critical in stemming the flow of communism and other left-wing philosophies. He was a conservative internationalist, in the sense of engaging with the wider world and seeking to roll back the malevolent reach of the Soviet Union.

Undoubtedly there is danger in drawing generalisations from the record of one individual, and this thesis has argued wholeheartedly in favour of scholarship that sees foreign policy not as the output of monolithic beliefs, but as the product of a multitude of interactions between individuals, whether like-minded or not. Yet it is certainly the case that Helms spoke to a wider community, best labelled as "movement" conservatism. These members of the post-war American right consistently banded together in support of a foreign policy that contained all of the above characteristics but which, crucially, was never subjected to what they saw as moderation or political pragmatism. Thus, they agreed with fellow conservatives and the vast majority of the Republican Party that the strategic objectives of U.S. policy abroad should be to roll back communism through military engagement. However, they loathed decisions made by

those conservatives in government who accepted compromise in actually implementing policy.

This movement conservative community took shape during the early 1970s, when the group opposed Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford in the pursuit of détente. The Panama Canal Treaties were an especially important example of their dissent, and the foreign policy agenda and organisational prowess that emerged from the fight against those agreements helped orientate movement conservatives for the next decade and a half. In these years, they worked to deter Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush from deviating from a pure conservative Central America strategy. Alongside Helms, the community included several outspoken conservative lawmakers – whose contributions mean we should treat the idea of Helms as an isolated contrarian legislator with caution – and the conservative media organs *National Review* and, particularly, *Human Events*.

Yet what comes to the fore in looking at Helms' foreign policy is the extent to which broader labels often obscure the nuance and contradiction that individual foreign policy activists may display. Helms was interventionist, but mostly reluctant to see U.S. troops on the ground. He was suspicious of multilateral solutions and international organisations, yet embraced a transnational community of activists from across the western hemisphere. U.S. interests were his primary concern, but he sided with nationalists in Central America who resented and often opposed United States involvement in their country's affairs. A conservative who found company with Ted Kennedy and John Kerry in a campaign against Manuel Noriega, a staunch proponent of senatorial prerogatives who defended the Reagan administration's contempt for Congress during Iran-Contra, an advocate of democracy who allied with dictators: Helms is a testament to the importance of understanding foreign policy not in broad generalisations, but as the output of a vast collection of individual actors, many of whom cannot be pinned down by a single label.

Asking whether one of these individuals can make a difference to foreign policy has also been a central part of this thesis. There has been strong debate in scholarship over the role of Congress, and individual legislators, in determining the direction of U.S. foreign policy. Helms' record suggests that there is a middle ground between those who see a passive Congress and those who argue for a more assertive one: a synthesis first suggested by James Lindsay in his work on the new institutionalists of the 1980s and early 1990s.⁹⁸⁰ Helms faced enormous challenges in trying to persuade successive administrations of his case. The executive branch has an enormously powerful voice in foreign policy, with the ability to bypass Congress in any number of ways: not least by sticking to the letter of foreign policy law, but not necessarily the spirit. Helms often found it difficult to overcome these restrictions, and the enormous bureaucratic momentum built up by years of one policy or another.

However, this does not mean Helms did not enjoy success in influencing foreign policy. Committee hearings and floor speeches challenged dominant official agendas, and could place the executive branch or rival policy factions on the back foot. It could, over time, even contribute to noticeable about-turns in the direction of policy – as was the case in Panama in the late 1980s. The senator was especially successful when working as part of a wider transnational conservative community that shared his vision for the hemisphere. This community provided Helms with access to both local political elites and grassroots sympathisers who provided trusted information – at least in the senator's opinion – on events as they unfolded. Such information shaped Helms' rhetoric, and determined which issues he would focus on and at what time. It deprived the State Department and other executive branch agencies of a monopoly on information provided to Congress, reducing their ability to control the foreign policy narrative, and generating opportunities for Helms to craft or

⁹⁸⁰ Lindsay, "Congress, Foreign Policy, and the New Institutionalism," 281-283.

exploit policy windows. It suggests that, for those looking to succeed as policy entrepreneurs, externally-sourced information is invaluable.

Yet the transnational community that Helms and his staff worked within was more than just a means of gathering information. It permitted the senator to shape events on the ground, and at various times he and his aides had a greater say in matters than executive branch officials. His close relationship with Roberto D'Aubuisson and the hard right in El Salvador, for example, was critical in reducing tensions at several points during the civil war. In Panama, it was with Helms and his staff that anti-Noriega rebels negotiated during the failed Giroldi coup of October 1989. In Nicaragua, where a fragmented Contra policy opened up any number of contact points with the foreign policy-making process, Helms' allies were able to directly influence the composition and direction of the rebel forces. Each of these examples was a testament to the significance of the transnational right in Latin America's Cold War.

The full extent of Helms' network, as well as that of the conservative anti-communist community in Latin America, is yet to be fully explored. There are challenges in furthering this line of research, not least a lingering resistance among members of these networks to fully reveal the complex web of connections that brought conservative anti-communist activists together in this period. Yet as greater documentation is opened to scholarly scrutiny – and here the soon-to-be refurbished Helms papers will be critical – it may be possible to draw more fulfilling conclusions about the goals and methods of this community. It is to be hoped that those wishing to develop the literature on modern conservatism, advocacy networks, or simply the Cold War more widely, will look to right-wing networks with the same curiosity as that applied to left-wing networks in the past two decades.

One thing that can be said of the transnational conservative network, and of Helms himself, is that a “long” Cold War was at the heart of their agenda. Far from culminating with the collapse of communism in Eastern

Europe in the final days of 1989, or even with the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, Cold War conservatism persisted into the early 1990s and beyond. Partly this reflected the continued presence of easily-definable communist foes in Central America in the early 1990s: the FMLN did not demobilise prior to the 1992 Salvadoran peace accords, nor did the Sandinistas disappear from Nicaragua's post-civil war reconstruction. Alongside Fidel Castro, whose endurance continued to infuriate conservatives, the presence of these organisations was sufficient for Helms and his conservative allies to reject the so-called New World Order that the Bush administration embraced. It also differentiated the senator from former allies, most notably Pat Buchanan, who now saw a chance to return America – or at least the Republican Party – to a more isolationist standpoint.⁹⁸¹

Yet the “long” Cold War also reflected ideological imperatives that Helms attached to non-traditional threats that challenged accepted norms of international politics toward the end of the Cold War. Foremost among these was the proliferation of Latin American drug cartels and the increasing levels of illegal narcotics in the United States. While drug trafficking was incorporated into the national security agenda in the final years of the Cold War, the majority of American government and law enforcement officials divorced the issue from communism. Helms, on the other hand, long convinced of the relationship between communists and drug trafficking, saw a continued communist effort to undermine western society from within. The relationship between drugs and communists sustained Helms' ideological fervour in his campaign against Manuel Noriega, and contributed to his continuing obsession with Fidel Castro.

This commitment to Cold War ideals persisted right through the mid-1990s. Helms derailed Robert Pastor's nomination as President

⁹⁸¹ John Kenneth White, *Still Seeing Red: How the Cold War Shapes the New American Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 206-207.

Clinton's ambassador to Panama out of a lingering anger at Pastor's role in the Panama Canal Treaties, prompting Pastor to condemn the senator for continuing to fight the Cold War. Yet it was the Helms-Burton Act, signed into law by President Clinton in 1996, which most clearly revealed the persistence of Cold War ideology undimmed by the shifting international arena of the 1990s. The act extended U.S. sanctions against Cuba, and, as William LeoGrande notes, 'chiselled into stone' thirty-five years of U.S. antagonism toward the Caribbean nation.⁹⁸² For Helms, it was not a product of a new foreign policy agenda, but rather the logical continuation of a strategy founded on almost forty years of anti-communist principles. 'There must be no retreat', Helms told his Senate colleagues when he first introduced the bill. 'If anything, with the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and the end of Soviet subsidies to Cuba, the embargo is finally having the effect on Castro that has been intended all along. Why should the United States let up the pressure now? It's time to tighten the screws – not loosen them.'⁹⁸³

Running parallel to Helms' "long" Cold War was his "broad" Cold War. The senator's record in Central America supports the calls to grant a greater role for agency to the so-called "periphery" in histories of the conflict. The senator's concern that the fate of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Panama would shape the United States' ability to survive the Cold War – not just ideologically, but physically – is a reminder that America's Cold Warriors were expansive in their understanding of the conflict's geographical spread, even if Helms continued to selectively interpret peripheral affairs as simple reflections of Soviet bloc priorities.

⁹⁸² William M. LeoGrande, "Enemies Evermore: U.S. Policy Toward Cuba After Helms-Burton," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 29, No. 1 (February, 1997), 211. For more on Helms-Burton, see Morris Morley and Chris McGillion, *Unfinished Business: America and Cuba After the Cold War, 1989-2001* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 79-130, and Roy Joaquín, *Cuba, The United States, and the Helms-Burton Doctrine: International Reactions* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000).

⁹⁸³ Jesse Helms (NC), "Statements On Introduced Bills And Joint Resolution," *Cong. Rec.* 141 (1995), 4238.

Central America was the place Jesse Helms made his stand over the fate of U.S. Cold War strategy. He and his allies saw a chance to correct the wrongs of thirty years of foreign policy. It wasn't just an opportunity to jolt the United States from its post-Vietnam détente and malaise, but was also a chance to wrest the nation from a much longer and deeper unwillingness to make the sacrifices necessary to destroy the Soviet Union. In Central America, the mistakes of Vietnam would be laid to rest, but so too would the nation's errors in failing to deal resolutely with communism in Africa, Cuba, Korea, and China. Then, once the communist menace had been removed, the much-vaunted empire of liberty that Helms treasured could be constructed. Sister republics – anti-communist, devoted to the free-market, and bound by shared Judaeo-Christian morality and traditions – would not only allow their own people to prosper, but would strengthen the United States in turn.

Central America was also a battlefield upon which Helms made a stand over the direction of modern American conservatism. In those years when the post-war right grasped the reins of power in Washington, and faced the inevitable challenges of governing, Helms demanded a purist conservative foreign policy from his presidents. El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Panama, already suffering the effects of their own bitter internal conflicts as well as the superpower struggle imposed by the United States and the Soviet Union, found themselves at the centre of a conflict over how conservative principles would be translated into policy. It was a bitter contest, played out by rival factions spread across Congress, the executive branch, the media, and the grass-roots conservative community. Jesse Helms was at its centre: rallying movement conservatives in their campaign to destroy not only communist and leftist forces in the region, but also those who would threaten the purity of conservatism. The senator was among the first to join the battlefield, and one of the last to leave.

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