they were *really* thinking, instead of falling all over themselves in obsequious deference. For me, it was just such a . . . it was just the truth. And I was in no compromising mood.

Strategy decisions about the movement’s general relational demeanor toward the powers of Congress inevitably shaped the movement’s collective identity. Likewise, the reverse was true: groups within the movement that had successfully constructed a clear sense of collective self tended to determine more easily the kind of strategic approach they wanted to take toward Congress. With the ongoing differences between groups within the movement on this issue of relating to Congress, the movement as a whole tended to vacillate between the postures of cooperative insider and antagonistic challenger. This enabled the movement to play multiple political roles, as needed. But it also worked to undermine consistency in its long-term strategic lobbying effort. In the end, Congress proved neither particularly cooperative nor consistently inhospitable. For most members of Congress, Democrats and Republicans alike, the Central America peace movement was too disruptive and intrusive to collaborate with easily, yet too disruptive and intrusive to ignore. Hence, the movement and Congress maintained an uneasy relationship of mutual need and mutual frustration.

**CONCLUSION**

In this chapter we have explored the complementary processes of strategic decision making and collective identity formation in the life of the Central America peace movement. In the next chapter, we will explore another facet of movement strategy construction and identity construction: the role of the mass media in shaping public discourse about Central America. Paradoxically, though more concerned with political appearances and symbols than political substance—or, more accurately, by helping to generate political substance through the manipulation of appearances and symbols—the mass media, as an institution, played at least as important a role in shaping the struggle over Central America in the 1980s as did the Central America peace movement, the U.S. Congress, and the White House. It is to this key role that we now turn our attention.
gan required not simply struggling to win a political debate, but, more importantly, struggling to control the debate’s agenda and vocabulary.

This chapter analyzes the battles of public discourse that constituted a key element of the Central America peace movement’s struggle to defeat President Reagan’s low-intensity war in Central America. Here we examine the relative cultural power of alternative interpretive “packagings” of Central America that the movement and the administration sought to establish as reality in the public imagination. We investigate the multiple factors that shaped how successful the packages’ sponsors were in projecting their social constructions of the Central American reality to and through the mass media. And we trace historically key moments in the development of the struggle to define Central America, to explain better the outcome of the larger political conflict.

MEDIA BIASES AND FILTERS

What animated the conflict between the Central America peace movement and the Reagan administration, ultimately, was their very different, largely incompatible interpretations of Central America. Their divergent answers to the question, “How ought the U.S. best respond to the evolving Central American sociopolitical reality?” were rooted in very different understandings of the nature of that sociopolitical reality. Consequently, winning the battle over U.S. Central American policy required that either the Central America peace movement or the Reagan administration persuade the American public and Congress to adopt its analysis of Central America. One of the primary communications vehicles through which both sides sought to do so was the mass media. Generating sympathetic television, newspaper, newsmagazine, and radio coverage that would promulgate the desired framings of Central America was critical for both the Reagan administration and the Central America peace movement.

Any analysis of the battle to use the mass media to define the Central American “reality” for the American public and Congress must recognize that the mass media itself is not an open, impartial, and transparent vehicle of communication. Instead, mass media institutions are characterized by definite interests, biases, norms, and practices that significantly condition what and how material gets published and broadcasted to mass audiences. The mass media does not simply and disinterestedly facilitate reality definition, but actively participates as an influential and influencing actor in the reality-defining process (Halloran, Elliot, and Murdock 1970; Molotch and Lester 1974; Ryan 1991; Gitlin 1980). Here we examine three aspects of mass media structure and practice that influenced the administration and the peace movement’s battle to interpret Central America: the definition of newsworthiness, the dictates of “objectivity,” and the impact of journalists’ daily routines.

News reporters, writers, editors, and producers all share a common set of assumptions about what is newsworthy. Only those events and ideas that are considered to be current, publicly recognized, important, and interesting make the papers and television news broadcasts. Events, experiences, and ideas judged by media producers as passé, unfamiliar, inconsequential, or dull rarely, if ever, make the news—no matter how meaningful, prevalent, vital, or revealing they actually may be. Furthermore, newsworthiness depends heavily on the availability of a “news peg”—such as a holiday, anniversary, predictable event, tragic incident, or piece of breaking news—which acts as a hook upon which to “hang” a story (Gans 1979: 168; Ryan 1991: 96–99). Moreover, the concern with what’s interesting makes stories that focus on individual personalities involved in an event more newsworthy than those that analyze underlying systemic or structural, substantive issues behind an event. Finally, incidents and issues that are accompanied by emotion-evoking action visuals, one-liner “sound bites,” and culturally resonant prepackaged interpretations stand a much greater chance of being judged newsworthy.

These criteria of newsworthiness were tremendously relevant for those struggling to project alternative definitions of Central America to and through the media. The ongoing Contra war, Salvadoran death squads, and the Iran-Contra affair eventually could become passé and, therefore, ignorable, according to U.S. media standards. News stories on anti-administration demonstrations could focus on a handful of violent protesters (the interesting) rather than on the peaceful majority’s central grievance (the meaningful). Reports on Sanctuary could concentrate on the fact of clergy violating the law (the novel) and neglect the actual reasons why clergy felt compelled to do so (the significant). And coverage of the Iran-Contra scandal could fixate on Oliver North’s personal magnetism (the individual-interest angle) yet overlook analyses of the unconstitutional security apparatus that he orchestrated (the impor-
tant). Thus, Central America peace movement activists had to struggle both to make their media pitches fit the criteria of newsworthiness and to minimize distortions of their message when their issues were covered. Whereas anything the White House said was automatically considered important and interesting news, for the movement, largely unknown activists had to establish themselves as the publicly recognizable representatives of an important oppositional position. They had to demonstrate currency without appearing faddish or opportunistic, and continually offer an interesting message without inviting the media to fixate on fascinating but extraneous aspects of their work.

A second industry convention that conditioned the media's treatment of Central America was the belief in the need for journalistic "objectivity." Mainstream news reporters and editors uniformly believe that responsible journalism must be objective, balanced, value-free. Seeking to avoid any hint of "adversarial" or "advocacy" journalism, newsmen and women generally conceive of themselves as politically neutral reporters of facts who leave it up to the reading and viewing public to make value judgments (Hertsgaard 1989: 65-66; Ryan 1991: 176-79). In practice, this objectivity norm means that journalists tend to focus more on discrete events than on in-depth analytical interpretations of those events. They rely heavily on "official" sources of news, such as White House spokespeople, members of Congress, business leaders, and academic specialists. And they avoid stories that seem too politically critical, that quote "irresponsible" sources, or that give voice to "extremist" positions. In the interest of balance, journalists do customarily feel obliged to present opposing sides of an issue. But the range of those contending positions is usually limited to the officially acceptable views of Republican-versus-Democrat, conservative-versus-liberal, defense attorney-versus-prosecuting attorney, and the like. Thus, according to independent journalist I. F. Stone (quoted in Hertsgaard 1989: 66), "Most of the time objectivity is just a rationale for regurgitating the conventional wisdom of the day. If what you're saying challenges the stereotypes of the day, it's hard to get it printed."

The media norm of objectivity skewed the administration and movement's struggle in favor of the White House. Journalists' heavy reliance on official sources automatically gave an advantage to the White House. Often, in the interest of allowing their audience to make value judgments, news reporters simply presented Reagan administration views of Central America without comment or analysis (Spence 1987). In effect, the media became a "mouthpiece of the government, a stenographer to power" (Hertsgaard 1989: 66).3 Reporters' common practice of presenting opposing sides of a debate did afford the Central America peace movement some opportunity for voice, when journalists sought out administration critics to balance White House statements. But on the whole, these opportunities carried significant limitations on the movement's capacity to counter the administration's framings of Central America. When movement spokespeople were tapped for contrary views, critiques that went beyond those typically voiced by oppositional Washington elites—policy makers, congresspeople, academics—were often considered too out of the mainstream for publication. Suggestions, for example, that El Salvador's FMLN guerrillas were motivated by legitimate grievances, that Salvadoran elections did not necessarily verify the existence of democracy, or that the Sandinistas actually may have accomplished some good for Nicaragua were often dismissed as "biased" or "soft on communism." Stories that did offer trenchant critiques of White House views tended to be published irregularly, since a steady flow of adversarial pieces in one publication was typically suspected as "politically motivated." Finally, certain harsh but true realities—that, for example, the administration repeatedly knowingly lied about Central America, or that the President's Iran-Contra offenses may have been impeachable—were simply matters too delicate to express as serious possibilities in the media. However true they might have been, they were also unpopular with the public and Congress, and so were disregarded by the press (Hertsgaard 1989: 333-34).4

A third aspect of media practice that influenced the struggle to interpret Central America to and through the media was the daily news routines of journalists and editors. The news industry copes with scarce resources and the demand for consistent news coverage through a series of routinized practices that structure the efficient production of news—all of which shape the content of the news. The daily pressure of production deadlines, for example, forces journalists to rely on safe, conventional sources of information—"experts" from the "Golden Rolodex"—who have proven accessible and articulate (Ryan 1991: 142-43; also see Cutler 1984). According to ABC News White House correspondent Sam Donaldson (quoted in Cooper and Soley 1990: 45):

To sit down while you're facing a deadline and say, "Gee, there must be some other expert we haven't thought of. Let's beat the bushes and launch a search of the city or of the country for them." Well, that takes a
lot more time than flipping a card on the Rolodex. A second reason is that we know these [known] guys provide a succinct response. You can’t come to me and say, “Sam, I know you’re on deadline, you need a comment on such and such, go out and take a chance on Mr. X.” No, I’m sorry folks, I don’t have time to take a chance on Mr. X.

Furthermore, reporters are typically assigned to institutionalized “news beats”—such as business or crime beats—that generate a constant supply of stories. Issues and events that are not visible to reporters on a beat or do not fit this predetermined news structure are unlikely to receive coverage. In addition, the vast majority of news covers prescheduled events—such as conferences of experts, political announcements, campaign debates, and visits from foreign dignitaries—to which reporters and camera teams are assigned in advance (Tuchman 1973). Consequently, the events that receive coverage are those sponsored by groups that have the prominence and resources to command the media’s attention. Moreover, national and regional news producers rely heavily on AP and UPI wire services and professionally crafted news releases in deciding what is the day’s news. This establishes additional barriers for grassroots challengers from below who desire access into the reality-defining media process. If their stories or news releases do not make the wires or impress the editor, however important they actually may be, they will go unreported. Similarly, newspaper, radio, and television news editors look to the Washington Post and the New York Times to determine what is newsworthy. If a movement’s story is not reported in one of these standard-setting papers, it probably won’t be covered elsewhere. Finally, journalists work within routinized space and format limitations. Radio stories typically must be less than forty seconds, television reports less than ninety seconds long, and newspaper articles must fit within a rather small number of column inches, predetermined by the editor. Consequently, stories that require significant background elaboration to understand properly are either disregarded or distorted through oversimplification (Ryan 1991: 147–49).

All of these content-shaping news routines significantly disadvantaged Central America peace movement activists. Few if any of them were expert sources found in journalists’ Rolodex files. At best, they had to work hard over time in hopes of ever becoming trusted news sources. Since few newspapers or radio or television news programs had reporters assigned to a “political protest” beat, the burden lay with Central America peace activists to make their message heard and relev-

vant within the bounds of the standard “International Affairs” or “Congressional” news beats. Furthermore, compared to their opponents, Central America peace organizations often lacked the prominence and resources needed to get their issues on major wire services or news editors’ assignment lists. And some movement activists, especially inexperienced ones, often found it difficult explaining their views on Central America—which required sufficient historical awareness and critical political consciousness—briefly enough to fit journalists’ standard format limitations. Winning the battle to interpret Central America, therefore, demanded that Central America peace activists learn to work with, and not against, journalists’ news routines. It also required that they surmount the barriers formed by the media norm of “objectivity” and overcome the neglect and distortions generated by the industry’s constricted criteria of newsworthiness.

FRAMING CENTRAL AMERICA

Central America did not present itself to interested U.S. citizens as an objective fact or self-evident reality. Nor could it have. Access to objective knowledge about “what was really happening” in Central America was simply unavailable. Theoretically, there abides a world of objective facticity “out there” that exists apart from anyone’s comprehending of it. But no one enjoys a privileged, unbiased, unmediated knowledge of that world. All human beings can ever possess are constructed interpretations of it. While some interpretations are arguably more accurate, coherent, or truthful than others, they remain constructed interpretations nonetheless. The challenge that faced both the Central America peace movement and the White House was selling to the American public and Congress a believable interpretation of the Central American “reality” that supported their policy proposals, while simultaneously discrediting their opponent’s interpretations.

This task was complicated by two major difficulties: unmanageable complexity and inadequate context. First, the Central American reality of the 1980s was tremendously complex, requiring a great deal of attention and education to understand fully. But few Americans had the interest and resources needed to grasp that complexity. Furthermore, it was nearly impossible for such sociopolitical complexity to be conveyed through the communication medias—primarily newspaper, radio, and television—through which the movement and the administration would contend for public acceptance of their interpretations. Second, a vast
majority of Americans and congressional representatives lacked an adequate context for making appropriate decisions about Central America. Relatively few of them had ever visited, much less lived in, Central America. And very few possessed the kind of familiarity with Central American history and culture necessary for making informed judgments about Central American policy. These complicating difficulties produced two results. First, Central America’s complexity became tremendously oversimplified in U.S. political discourse on the subject, reduced to simple categories and arguments that Americans could easily grasp. Second, contending interpretations of Central America proved persuasive or not to Americans vis-à-vis their resonance with U.S. history and culture, not Central American history and culture. Thus, systemic and situational imperatives propelled the Central America peace movement and the Reagan administration to pitch to Americans relatively glossed-over portraits of Central America, the believability of which were based more on their resonance with U.S. values and experiences than with the Central American reality itself.

Perhaps the best way to explore the battle between the Central America peace movement and the White House is through frame analysis. “Frames” are interpretive formulas that assign meanings to events and issues by selecting out and organizing certain elements into packaged story lines. Frames employ clusters of assertions, metaphors, anecdotes, catchphrases, exemplars, and visual images to highlight certain aspects of an event or issue that fit and promote an internally coherent interpretation, and disregard others that do not (Gamson 1989; Snow and Benford 1988; Gamson and Modigliani 1989). In this way, a frame puts a certain “spin” on an issue or event, eliciting one specific interpretation of it and excluding others. A frame establishes the boundaries of attention to an issue or event—as a picture frame does for a photograph—and provides an internal skeletal structure that determines the overall pattern of discourse on an issue or event, as a frame of a building does for its overall form and appearance (Gamson et al. 1992: 385).

An effective political frame includes a diagnosis of a problem, a prognosis for a solution, and a motivation providing a rationale for political involvement to help solve the specified problem (Snow and Benford 1988: 200–204). The relative robustness of any frame is determined by the emotional impact of its visual images and catchphrases, by the strength of its “cultural resonance,” by the extent of its experiential credibility, and by the salience of the cultural values to which it appeals. Robust frames deeply engage their targets’ emotions, are not blatantly contradicted by relevant empirical evidence, and, perhaps most importantly, strongly resonate with primary themes deeply embedded in the dominant cultural tradition.

From this perspective, we can speak of the Central America peace movement and the Reagan administration as “framing” Central America for the American people and Congress. Both promoted portrayals of the region that organized certain elements of the Central American reality into simplified interpretive packages to mobilize support for specific political policies. To construe a Central American reality that supported its policy, the White House promoted two principal framings of Central America, the Soviet-aggression frame and the fragile-democracy frame. To define a Central American reality that justified its policy proposals, the Central America peace movement advanced four interpretive framings of the region, the botching-diplomacy frame, the wayward-America frame, and the imperial-America frame. Here we describe and analyze at an abstract, static level the logic, strengths, and weaknesses of these six frames. Later in this chapter, we examine historically the dynamic process by which these competing frames engaged each other over the course of the decade and the political outcomes that resulted as different frames gained and lost ascendancy in the struggle of political discourse.

The Reagan administration initiated the rhetorical battle to define Central America in 1981 by promoting a Soviet-aggression framing of the region. The “Central America crisis,” according to this frame—first advanced by Secretary of State Alexander Haig—was nothing other than an external communist intrusion in the region that required a military response. Its core argument may be summarized as follows:

Soviet- and Cuban-style communism is now penetrating America’s own backyard with frightening speed and success. The Marxist-Leninist Sandinistas have already established a Soviet beachhead in Nicaragua and the FMLN rebels threaten to do the same in El Salvador. After that, Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Mexico will fall like dominos into communism’s grip (Diagnosis). A window of opportunity exists to counter this communist aggression. If America acts decisively, these Soviet advances can be rolled back and Central America freed from communist control. But if America fails to respond, Soviet-style communism will soon advance to the edge of the Rio Grande. Direct U.S. troop combat is unnecessary, if we act now, for the valiant Nicaraguan Contras and Salvadoran army can defeat communism themselves. All they need is U.S. moral, financial, and technical support (Prognosis). Soviet aggression in
Central America is a major threat to U.S. vital security interests. A failure to confront it there jeopardizes our political credibility in the world and strategic control over our own hemisphere. As the world's only moral superpower, we have a responsibility to resist Soviet aggression anywhere, but particularly in our own backyard. Both our national self-interest and moral responsibility to champion freedom demand that we extend desperately needed Contra and Salvadoran aid now (Motivation).

Given the fact that these frames' relative persuasiveness was determined vis-à-vis their resonance with U.S., not Central American, history and culture, this Soviet-aggression frame was potent (see table 9.1). For Americans, its visual images and catchphrases were emotionally engaging, its story line fit many important U.S. cold-war military experiences, and the cultural values and themes to which it appealed were among the strongest and deepest in the cultural tradition. The frame's only fatal weakness was a potential inability of its promoter to demonstrate clear Soviet interference in Central America, in which case the frame would become impertinent.

In the course of its eight years of attempting to form Central American policy, the White House sponsored and championed a second view of the Central American reality with its fragile-democracy frame, whose basic story line ran as follows:

In Central America, fragile democratic movements are struggling valiantly against inimical forces to establish lasting political freedom in the region. In El Salvador, a fledging democracy is under siege by right-wing extremists, communist guerrillas, economic underdevelopment, and a legacy of human rights abuses. And in Nicaragua, a democratic opposition-coalition is fighting courageously for freedom against a totalitarian Marxist-Leninist state. Forces of freedom are also strengthening the fragile democracies of Guatemala and Honduras. The Central American people's yearning for freedom and democracy is extraordinary and inspiring. But anti-democratic forces in the region, attacking from all sides, threaten to extinguish freedom's flickering flame (Diagnosis). Democracy can survive and thrive in Central America. But it needs America's help. The U.S. must provide economic aid, security assistance, and political backing to friendly centrist regimes—such as El Salvador's Christian Democratic Party—and moral and financial support to the "freedom fighters" of the Nicaraguan democratic resistance. With America's help, democracy can vanquish tyranny in Central America and establish a bright future of peace and freedom (Prognosis). The United States of America—the world's symbol and bastion of democratic freedom—is entrusted with the sacred duty to promote and defend democracy throughout the world.

Table 9.1. Soviet-Aggression Frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbolic Resources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visual Images:</strong> Ort gas with Castro or in Moscow, Nicaraguans and FMLN with Soviet weapons, Arafat in Managua.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Historical Analogies:</strong> Cuba 1959, Angola 1975.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths and Constraints:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Resonance:</strong> Very strong. Cold war anti-communist containment-theory imperative, Monroe Doctrine, peace through strength, antiterrorism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Value Salience:</strong> Very high. Individual freedom, anti-communism, U.S. national security.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frame Vulnerability:</strong> High but limited. Fear of military quagmire involving unnecessary loss of U.S. soldiers lives. Revolutions in Central America reflect not Soviet expansionism but legitimate responses to redress poverty and injustice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Today, freedom's patriots in our neighboring countries of Central America beckon earnestly for our help. We must not fail these voices of hope and freedom. We must answer their call resolutely with the support and action they so desperately need (Motivation).

This fragile-democracy frame was also quite robust, though somewhat less so than the Soviet-aggression frame described above (see table 9.2). Its catchphrases and visual images were quite strong, and its cultural resonance very strong. But the frame tended to suffer from experiential implausibility, as evidence accumulated that the purported democratic forces in Central America were not as free and clean as the administration had originally proclaimed.

Nevertheless, together, the Soviet-aggression frame and the fragile-democracy frame presented a powerful interpretive combination, defining Central America in a way—for those who accepted the frames' assumptions—as to make the White House's regional policy almost irresistible. This was especially true for Americans who were less knowledgeable about the actual political and economic situation in Central America. The two frames tapped some of America's most dearly cherished cultural values: individual freedom, anti-communism, democracy, and the resolute defense of national security. And politically, the two frames had the theoretical potential to assemble a majority coalition in Congress, with the Soviet-aggression frame appealing especially to con-
Table 9.2. Fragile Democracies Frame

**Symbolic Resources**

Visual Images: José Napoleón Duarte campaigning for Salvadoran Presidency, lines of peasants braving threats of violence in election, FDN freedom fighters advancing on Sandinista soldiers.


**Strengths and Constraints:**

*Cultural Resonance:* Very strong. Faith in democracy, procedural legitimacy of elections, aiding freedom’s struggle.

*Experiential Credibility:* Moderately low. Recurrent abuses, corruption, and impotence of supposedly democratic forces in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and among the Contras.

*Value Salience:* Very high. Freedom and democracy core cultural values.

*Frame Vulnerability:* Moderately high. Frame undermined by ongoing death-squad and military atrocities, corrupt justice system, and increasing political weakness of El Salvador’s Duarte regime, Somoza-National Guard ties, human rights atrocities, and military ineffectiveness of Nicaraguan Contras; 1984 Nicaraguan elections with Sandinista victory.

The Central America peace movement entered the rhetorical battle with its own potent counterframes, all of which, when accepted, convincingly discredited President Reagan’s Central American policy. The earliest and most visceral of these was the another-Vietnam frame, which enjoyed, from the start, an automatic, broad acceptance among the American people. Its core contention was thus vocalized:

The warmongering Reagan administration is rapidly and inextricably entangling the U.S. in the civil wars of small third-world countries in Central America. Today we send U.S. military aid and advisers. Tomorrow we will be forced to send American boys to fight and die in distant jungles for causes nobody really understands or cares about. And withdrawing from such quagmires will be difficult and humiliating (Diagnosis). Apathy today will bring disaster tomorrow. But we can avoid another Vietnam by quickly terminating now the President’s frightening escalation of U.S. military involvement in Central America. The American people can demand that Congress, with its budgetary power, deny our hawkish President the fiscal ability to lead the U.S. into another bloody, protracted guerrilla war (Prognosis). Central America’s problems do not have U.S. military solutions. So if the American people and Congress do not block our trigger-happy President today, it’s just a matter of time before our sons, friends, husbands, and perhaps we ourselves will be coming home from San Salvador and Tegucigalpa in body bags, and for no good reason. We must act now to stop Reagan before it’s too late! (Motivation).

So credible was this counterframe in the public imagination that, initially, it did not even require an organized movement to become formulated and articulated. Another-Vietnam erupted as the instantaneous, almost knee-jerk rebuttal to Alexander Haig’s Soviet-aggression campaign on Central America in 1981. This uncomplicated frame’s visual images, lifted as they were from fresh national experience, were wrenchingly powerful (see table 9.3). For the same reason, the frame’s experiential credibility was, for most Americans, impeccable, its cultural resonance enormously strong, and its catchphrases gripping. Thus, in the early 1980s, the another-Vietnam frame suffered virtually no internal logical, cultural, emotional, or empirical weaknesses.5 Outside of an unlikely, imminent Soviet threat to U.S. territory, which would effectively nullify the frame, the another-Vietnam story line’s only vulnerability was that of possible inapplicability. If Americans became confident that Central America posed no danger of dragging the U.S. into direct combat involvement, the frame would simply become irrelevant. But in the early 1980s such confidence was conspicuously lacking.

A second counterframe that also served well the purposes of the Central America peace movement was the botching-diplomacy frame. Couched in less emotional and reactive, more rational and judicious language than the another-Vietnam frame, this interpretation of Central America maintained the following view:

The U.S. has an important role to play in Central America. But the Reagan administration is taking a totally wrong approach and badly bungling U.S. affairs in Central America. By evading negotiations, arming murderers, mining Nicaraguan harbors, publishing “terrorism manuals,” snubbing the World Court, etc., the administration is embarrassing the U.S. before its allies, polarizing and radicalizing the Central American situation, and aborting chances for reasonable and responsible solutions (Diagnosis). The U.S. can help resolve the Central America crisis, but only by ceasing U.S. covert military operations, protecting peace negotiations without preconditions, expanding U.S. development aid to the region (contingent on respect for human rights), and encouraging amnesty and reconciliation programs for rebels and exiles. By intelligent-ly and prudently using less stick and more carrot, the U.S. can secure its
Table 9.3. Another Vietnam Frame

**Symbolic Resources**

**VISUAL IMAGES:** Body bags returning to America, U.S. military boys wounded and dying in tropical jungles.

**CATCHPHRASES:** “Quagmire,” “El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam,” “another Vietnam.”

**HISTORICAL ANALOGY:** Vietnam 1964–73

**Strengths and Constraints:**

**CULTURAL RESONANCE:** Very strong. American exceptionalism, historical legacy of U.S. isolationism, virtual consensus on Vietnam as well-meaning blunder.

**EXPERIENTIAL CREDIBILITY:** Very high. Vietnam a terrible destructive social trauma, President Reagan’s public history of hawkish tendencies.

**VALUE SALIENCE:** Moderate. Political potency grounded in recent historical experience, not central cultural value, except indirectly through inalienable right of individuals to life and pursuit of happiness.

**FRAME VULNERABILITY:** High but limited. If communist enemy perceived as direct threat to U.S. national security and territory, interventionistic antimcommunism imperative prevails.

Table 9.4. Botching-Diplomacy Frame

**Symbolic Resources**

**VISUAL IMAGES:** Central American peasants chanting anti-American slogans and songs, U.N. and E.C. officials condemning U.S. trade embargo on Nicaragua.

**CATCHPHRASES:** “Counterproductive policies,” “doomed to failure,” “polarizing the political situation,” “throwing gasoline on the fire,” “peace through negotiations.”

**HISTORICAL ANALOGY:** Bay of Pigs 1961.

**Strengths and Constraints:**

**CULTURAL RESONANCE:** Moderately strong. Cultural sub-themes of inept government, suspicion of authority, misgivings about the competence of U.S. military bureaucracy, coddling dictators, and President Reagan’s hawkish proclivities.

**EXPERIENTIAL CREDIBILITY:** High. The conflict’s ongoing irresolution, reports of atrocities, disapproval of European and Latin American allies, criticisms by U.S. policy elites, CIA scandals all confirm.

**VALUE SALIENCE:** Moderately high. Desire for respectable and competent executive office, strong U.S. influence in foreign affairs.

**FRAME VULNERABILITY:** Moderately high but limited. If Soviet expansionism believed to be fomenting Central American revolutions, frame discredited as “liberal,” “realistic,” “soft on communism.”

This botching-diplomacy frame was only moderately strong in its ability to counter the administration’s framing of Central America (see table 9.4). Its greatest strength was its experiential credibility—plenty of evidence suggested that the Reagan administration was botching U.S. relations in Central America. On the other hand, the frame’s visual images seemed somewhat foreign and its catchphrases slightly academic. Most Americans could recall few historical analogies appropriate to this frame. The cultural values to which the botching-diplomacy frame appealed were largely secondary to those values to which the President’s frames appealed. Because of its greater concern for the effectiveness and reputation of U.S. foreign relations than with the plight of the Central American people, this frame tended to remain subordinate to the movement’s other primary frames. Despite these disadvantages, the botching-diplomacy frame did remain an essential weapon in the movement’s rhetorical arsenal, since its logic appealed to political moderates in Congress and sectors of the American public that remained unpersuaded by the movement’s more militant frames.

Perhaps the Central America peace movement’s most dominant and enduring interpretation of Central America was the wayward-America frame, whose core argument could be summarized as follows:

The United States—whether because of unique national calling or mere human decency—should always act as a benevolent force in world affairs, promoting freedom, democracy, prosperity, and human welfare. But the Reagan administration is egregiously violating this principle in Central America by spending multi-millions of U.S. tax dollars to arm repressive dictators and death squads, train torturers, and equip armies that destroy villages and maim and kill women and children. In a horrible and tragic reversal of purpose, Ronald Reagan has made the U.S. an accomplice to gross and pointless evil and destruction (Diagnosis). If the majority of Americans understood the dreadful truth about Central America, they would demand change. Informed Americans can stop Reagan’s catastrophic Central America juggernaut by educating the American people and lobbying for a congressional ban on funds for Reagan’s Central America policy (Prognosis). Nobody wants America to stand for death, destruction, and misery. And awareness brings responsibility. Those who know the facts but fail to act become accessories to untold death and destruction. But those who oppose Reagan’s policy can save
untold lives, and excruciating suffering, and help to turn America away from its current dreadful policy. All decent Americans are morally obligated to oppose the President’s policy (Motivation).

This frame proved quite effective in mobilizing opposition to the administration’s Central American policy. Its visual images and catchphrases were engaging, its experiential credibility very high, and its cultural resonance very strong (see table 9.5). Moreover, this wayward-America frame was continually and powerfully reinforced by the Central American refugees’ stories and activists’ trips to Central America. Few Americans relished the thought of their tax dollars funding brutal armies to massacre thousands of innocent women and children, or the idea of the U.S. acting as a malevolent force in world affairs. Although a convincing Soviet-aggression frame tended to counter the wayward-America frame, few arguments could neutralize this frame’s ability to capitalize on the emotions issuing from these violations of Americans’ moral sensibilities. According to Cindy Buhl (1993):

Most Central America activists aren’t people who think Cuba has a far better system than ours. Maybe in New York or Berkeley. But that’s not where most people are coming from. The two strongest constituencies I worked with were the churches and unions, and that’s certainly not their philosophical outlook. Most activists are exactly the kind of people who bought everything about America that they were told in high school. And they’re just trying to make that ideal come true.

One final interpretation that some Central America peace activists brought to the political struggle was the imperial-America frame. Its basic story line ran as follows:

President Reagan’s deadly Central America policy is merely the latest chapter in a long, shameful history of U.S. imperial domination of the entire region. The Sandinistas and the FMLN have dared to throw off that domination in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and Reagan is punishing them as an example to the entire third world. Deceptive rhetoric aside, the U.S. is not really interested in freedom and democracy in Central America, but economic, political, and military hegemony. And the immoral and unjust cost of maintaining this U.S. imperialism is massive hunger, injustice, oppression, and violence for the majority of the Central American people (Diagnosis). For the first time in more than a century, Nicaragua stands the chance of resisting U.S. imperialism and building a free and just society. The Salvadoran opposition may face the same opportunity. But if they are to succeed, sympathetic Americans must champion their cause at home by obstructing a U.S. invasion of

Table 9.5. Wayward-America Frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbolic Resources</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visual Images:</strong> Women and children killed by U.S.-armed Contra and \Salvadoran soldiers, refugees fleeing U.S.-supported military regimes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catchphrases:</strong> “Contra thugs,” “U.S.-sponsored repression,” “subsidizing corrupt Latin dictators,” “showcase elections,” “condoning death squads,” “U.S. tax dollars kill women and children.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Historical Analogy:</strong> Vietnam’s My Lai massacre 1969.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths and Constraints</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Resonance:</strong> Very strong. Heritage of American exceptionalism, liberal humanitarianism, protection of innocent life, fighting “good” wars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experiential Credibility:</strong> Very high. Reports of religious assassinations, death squads, rights abuses, Contra atrocities, and refugees stories all confirm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Value Salience:</strong> Moderately high. U.S. moral idealism and self-image, belief in universal freedom from abusive government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frame Vulnerability:</strong> Moderately high. Entire frame undermined by the persuasion that U.S. policy is made tragically necessary by communist aggressors and is imperative to avert the even worse scenario of communist totalitarianism in Central America, in which light the frame takes on a “bleeding heart” tone. “Fair elections” of Central American U.S.-allied regimes further subvert this frame.</td>
</tr>
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Nicaragua and cutting off aid to the abusive Contras and Salvadoran military. These expressions of solidarity will help to break the stranglehold of U.S. imperialism so that independent, people-powered societies can create true peace, freedom, and equity for all Central Americans (Prognosis). Today, Central America faces a decisive, historic turning point. If Reagan prevails, U.S. domination of Central America and the unjust suffering and killing it causes will persist. But if Reagan is stopped, new possibilities of peace and justice will emerge. We, whose arrogant and domineering nation is guilty of so much death and destruction, must commit ourselves to solidarity with the people of Central America and political activism on their behalf (Motivation).

This was a difficult frame to sell to the American public and Congress (see table 9.6). Its language sounded far too radical and un-American to resonate with most Americans. Unlike the wayward-America frame, it defined U.S.-sponsored death and destruction in Central America not as a well-intentioned mistake or the work of one recalcitrant president, but the logical outworkings of a malignant, predatory national character—not a self-image widely held in the U.S. Furthermore, the values, emotions, images, and experiences to which this frame appealed were not those of the average American, but those of the conscientized Central American—exactly the kind of person who did not need to be mobilized.
to oppose White House Central American policy. Thus, for all its appeal among radicalized U.S. activists, the imperial-America frame—as a counter to the White House’s Soviet-aggression and fragile-democracy frames—was fraught with disabling defects.

These six frames—Soviet-aggression, fragile-democracy, another-Vietnam, botching-diplomacy, wayward-America, and imperial-America—were by no means the only interpretations of Central America advanced in the rhetorical battles over Central American policy. Other motifs, such as regional development and solidarity with the Central American people, also entered the debate (see, for instance, Ryan 1991: 242–43). But these six were the primary frames whose themes, images, and contentions recurrently dominated the public discourse and political rhetoric about Central America throughout the 1980s.

Neither the White House nor the Central America peace movement had to rely solely on the internal logic and cultural appeal of their Central America frames. Both possessed many other resources by which to actively promote their framed interpretations to and through the mass media. Typically, not unlike consumer products, the interpretive frames described above did not sell themselves on account of their strong cultural resonance or high experiential credibility alone. Rather, to exert a significant impact on public discourse, the frame sponsors needed actively and deliberately to publicize and market their frames to jour-

nalists, news reporters, editors, and, occasionally, media managers and owners. Next we examine the resources that the White House possessed and employed to sell their Central America frames to and through the mass media.

WHITE HOUSE RESOURCES

The Reagan White House was indisputably the most media-savvy U.S. presidential administration ever to hold office. No White House media relations team prior to or since President Reagan’s understood more clearly how the mass media worked, or possessed more interest in or skill for using the mass media as an instrument of policy promotion and implementation. “For the first time in any presidency,” observed David Gergen, White House director of communications, “we molded a communications policy around our legislative strategy” (Hertsgaard 1989: 23). Under the adroit leadership of Gergen, White House deputy chief of staff Michael Deaver, and chief of staff James Baker (U.S. News 1981), the Reagan administration built a finely tuned organizational media machine that skillfully mastered and controlled the coverage of the national mass media for years. In the words of Leslie Janka, deputy White House press secretary from 1981 to 1983 (quoted in Hertsgaard 1989: 6): “The whole thing was PR. This was a PR outfit that became President and took over the country. And to the degree then to which the Constitution forced them to do things like make a budget, run foreign policy and all that, they sort of did. But their first, last, and overarching activity was public relations.”

Key to the White House media machine’s success was detailed planning and coordination. Each Friday afternoon, the White House’s top communications staff met over lunch at a “Friday Group” meeting to plan overall media strategy. Then, with their big-picture strategy in place, each morning at 7:30, Baker, Deaver, and Attorney General Edwin Meese met for breakfast to review overnight political developments, news coverage, and legislative priorities. A half hour later, the day’s organizational directives were handed out by Baker at a meeting of senior White House staff. At 8:15 A.M., Baker, Gergen, assistant to the President Richard Darman, and White House press secretary Larry Speaks met for fifteen minutes to decide on the media “line of the day”—the single sound bite that the group wanted to lead the news coverage of all evening network news programs. Once determined, the line
of the day was sent via computer to senior administration officials and
via telephone conference calls to executive branch spokespeople
throughout the federal bureaucracy. Throughout the day, every signifi-
cant official in the executive bureaucracy would be expected to repeat
the press the day’s line, thus reinforcing the chosen theme in unity. In
addition, David Gergen often arranged Thursday morning and after-
noon “substance seminars” to educate executive branch spokespeople
about the foreign-policy or domestic issues on which the current media
strategy was focused. At 8:30 A.M., Deaver and his staff met for a com-
munications meeting to review the day’s scheduled events and coor-
dinate upcoming media events. At a 9:15 mini-briefing and again at the
regular noon press briefing, White House reporters would be given the
line of the day, which would usually make its way into the headlines and
network newscasts (Hertsgaard 1989: 34–37; Walsh 1986; also see
Stein 1986; Manoff 1986; Diamond 1985; Fields 1984; Griffith 1984;
Morgenthau and Cliff 1984; Hamburger 1982).

James Baker’s primary responsibility in this structure was to coordinate
the policy agenda and the media strategy, making sure that the
White House communications office, the Legislative Strategy Group,
the Friday Group, and various other political-outreach groups worked
together in unison (Isaacson 1982). According to Baker (quoted in
Hertsgaard 1989: 23), “Implementing policy depends on getting your
media operation and your political operation together, but so does run-
ing a successful political campaign. A, you’ve got to have a message,
and B, you’ve got to be able to sell that message. The only thing added
to that once you move into the White House is that you’ve got to be able
to sell it not just to the public but also on the Hill. But the key to selling
it on the Hill is to sell it publicly.”

Michael Deaver’s job was to conceive and plan a steady flow of
media events that would enhance President Reagan’s image and bolster
current policy efforts. His specialty was packaging captivating visual
images (Shapiro 1984; Broadcasting 1984). Deaver would visit each
media event’s location in advance, along with representatives of the tele-
vision networks, to orchestrate even the smallest details in order to
maximize visual effect. Deaver, for example, carefully pre-choreo-
graphed President Reagan’s entire 1983 Korea trip to the demilitarized
zone separating North and South Korea. After that trip, according to
Hertsgaard (1989: 24–25), “the evening news shows, newspapers, and
newsweeklies across the country were filled with inspiring photos of the
Leader of the Free World, dressed in flak jacket, staring down the Com-
munists through field glasses.” NBC news correspondent Andrea
Mitchell, who called the trip “one of the greatest advanced [sic] events
of all time,” remarked, “I saw the toe marks for [Reagan]. . . . When he
didn’t stand on his toe mark he was signaled by one of the advance men
to move over into the sunshine” (Hertsgaard 1989: 25; also see Posner
1981). As the plaque on deputy press secretary Larry Speaks’s desk
said, “You don’t tell us how to stage the news, we won’t tell you how to
cover it.”

David Gergen’s primary responsibility was to handle the news jour-
nalists on a day-to-day basis (Newsweek 1981). Gergen participated in
the daily White House press corps briefings and spent most of his day
on the telephone doing “back-channel spin control” on news stories
and coaxing network television officials to make maximum space avail-
able in their evening news broadcasts for White House events and
speeches. Besides the continual contacts maintained with reporters,
Gergen would make five to fifteen telephone calls a day to the three
network news editors about an hour and a half before their final story
deadlines to check on their content and discourage undesirable cover-
age (Hertsgaard 1989: 28–31). Tom Bettag, senior producer of the CBS
Gergen is no small thing. It’s a sort of subtle reminder, usually over rel-
atively small details. There was no ‘Don’t run that story!’ They under-
stand how much we brace at anything smacking of overt control. Usu-
ally it was more like, ‘We wonder if you realize that . . .’”

President Reagan was also a key participant in this media-relations
team. Despite his frequent embarrassing gaffes before the press, his
apparent ignorance of the substance of many policy issues, and his per-
sistently low public job-approval ratings, the President enjoyed the pos-
itive regard of the press and relatively high personal-appeal ratings
among the public (Blumenthal 1983; Time 1982; Griffith 1983, 1984,
1986). Ronald Reagan—with his affable personality, sincere demeanor,
and Hollywood acting experience—was extraordinarily effective in cul-
tivating positive press relations (Matthews 1984). According to Susan
Zirinsky, senior Washington producer at CBS News (quoted in Herts-
gaard 1989: 47), “Jimmy Carter you felt sorry for, but he was always
aloof and hard to get to know. But Reagan always made you laugh. It
was hard not to like him.” Newsweek editor Maynard Parker agrees:
“Reagan has gotten the breaks in terms of press coverage, for the rea-
son that most reporters covering him genuinely like the man and find it
difficult to be as tough as they might like.” This positive regard from the
press helped the White House politically, according to Joanna Bistany, deputy assistant to the President, "A lot of what we've done [politically was] because of Ronald Reagan and his warm personality. You can get away with a lot [of unpopular politics], because he can then come up and defuse the antagonism" (quoted in Hertsgaard 1989: 47). 8

Other important players in the White House media team included President Reagan's close adviser Richard Darman, who monitored the entire flow of written communications in and out of the White House and significantly shaped the Friday Group strategies; deputy press secretary Larry Speaks, the most visible member of the communications machine, who played the role of drawing fire from unhappy or aggressive reporters to divert their animosity away from his superiors; and pollster Richard Wirthlin, who regularly fed the White House media-relations apparatus vital public-opinion information on the President's political vulnerabilities and opportunities with various constituencies, as well as imaginative proposals for communications strategies to deal with those vulnerabilities and opportunities (Kenworthy 1991: 194; Hertsgaard 1989: 20–21).

This finely tuned and uncommonly proficient machine exploited the four advantages in media relations normally available to every presidential administration, namely, the powers to initiate, anticipate, regulate, and amplify. First, every White House administration, by virtue of the importance of the U.S. presidency, possesses the capacity not simply to influence the news, but actually to initiate news, to create advantageously timed news at will, to design and activate the news of the day. Thus Witness for Peace long-timer Kevin Kresse (1992) complained: "Every time Reagan sneezes, the press gives him the front page." Such power to initiate news is evident in the very feasibility of a "line of the day," but the Reagan media machine went much further than that in creating news.

On August 19, 1981, for example, the White House media-relations team scored a Vietnam-syndrome-purging public relations triumph when U.S. fighter planes shot down two Libyan jets over the Gulf of Sidra. The air strike had been originally planned for July. But Chief of Staff James Baker ordered the operation postponed for one month so as not to divert public attention away from the President's July tax-legislation victory in Congress. When the timing was right, and the Libyan planes downed, President Reagan was flown that morning to the USS Constellation for a staged photo opportunity. Thus, reporters were able to shoot news footage—which, according to plan, hit the networks just in time for the next evening's prime-time news broadcasts—of the fearless Commander in Chief at hostilities' front lines, giving the subliminal impression that the President had actually overseen the air attack. The fact that President Reagan had slept in bed through the entire incident—as Edwin Meese later accidently divulged to reporters—did nothing to diminish the visual impact of the planned media event (Hertsgaard 1989: 132–33; also see Alexandre 1987).

The White House applied that same capacity to create news events to strengthen their Central America campaign (Hallin 1987: 11–16). The shared belief in the existence of a "Central American crisis" was itself ultimately a social construction, mostly a political creation of Alexander Haig, that was later sustained by Ronald Reagan, William Clark, and Jeanne Kirkpatrick. Media coverage of the region was driven more by White House story leaks and press conferences than by actual significant events in Central America (see, for example, tables 5.1 and 5.2). Most conspicuously, Haig used the press and the release of the highly publicized White Paper "Communist Interference in El Salvador" in February 1981 to establish the theory that communist adventurism was to blame for Central America's unrest. Few reporters actually studied the White Paper or questioned its credibility. Most simply reported its allegations as fact. Thus, through mere public declaration, President Reagan's Secretary of State was able to generate a newsworthly "reality" where none had existed before. 9 Similarly, on November 4, 1984—election day in the U.S.—White House officials created a national-security sensation by leaking to CBS News an intelligence report claiming that the Soviet freighter Bakuriani was transporting Soviet MIG-21 fighter planes to Nicaragua. That action, claimed U.S. officials, warranted U.S. military retaliation. It was later admitted that no such MIGs were on board the Bakuriani. But this subsequent acknowledgment did not nullify the political impression of a potential military threat from Nicaragua advanced by the strategic leak of November 4.

Second, every presidential administration, by virtue of its access to privileged information, enjoys the ability to anticipate a great deal of breaking news, and thus get a head start on shaping the interpretive framing of that news. For example, in 1983, the Reagan White House learned that an impending government report on economic activity contained news of an upturn in new housing starts. In response, Michael
Deaver arranged to have the President flown to Fort Worth, Texas—where housing starts were increasing at an extraordinarily high rate and where polls showed Reagan needed to shore up his political support—for an upbeat photo opportunity with busy Houston construction workers at a new home development. According to Deaver (quoted in Hertsgaard 1989: 251):

Now, the press can say, “They brought us all the way down here to Fort Worth, Texas, just to have a show and make the President look good.” But the guy sitting there with his six-pack that night is looking at it and saying [here Deaver imitated the viewer, leaning sideways, cocking his head and squinting at an imaginary television set], “What’s the President doing there with those hard hats? Oh! Housing starts have gone up. Things must be getting better.”

Anticipating breaking news helped the administration shape the Central America debate as well. In December 1981, for example, El Salvador’s Atlacatl Battalion—the first Salvadoran army battalion trained by U.S. advisers—swept through the rebel-controlled province of Morazán, massacring between seven hundred and one thousand Salvadoran peasants. The White House, it was later revealed through released documents, had evidence of the massacre through cables from the U.S. embassy in San Salvador. But the day before the President was to formally certify to Congress that El Salvador was “achieving substantial control over all elements of its own armed forces” and making “a concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights,” the massacre was reported in the U.S. in front-page articles by Raymond Bonner of the New York Times and Alma Guillermoprieto of the Washington Post. In response to these potentially policy-damaging reports, Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders quickly appeared before Congress, contending persuasively that “no evidence” of a massacre existed. Shortly thereafter, newspapers such as the Wall Street Journal began depicting Bonner and Guillermoprieto as having been hoodwinked by a Salvadoran-rebel propaganda exercise (Hertsgaard 1989: 188–90; also see Chamorro 1987: 31–35). Through their advantage of being able to anticipate damaging news, administration officials were able to prepare to neutralize it.

Third, every White House administration, because of its possession of restricted information and power to establish ground rules with the media, enjoys the capacity to regulate the dissemination of important information through the media. Administration officials can choose, for example, to release to the press only some of the truth it knows on a subject (see, for instance, America 1986; Chamorro 1987: 26–31). Administration officials also can choose to hold the press at a distance, when more immediate media access would be risky. For instance, in order to minimize the political damage of President Reagan’s chronic gaffe problem, the White House media-relations team made the President highly unavailable to the press (Alter, DeFrank, and Warner 1984). They restricted daily media access, scheduled fewer Presidential press conferences than any other modern White House administration, and, in 1982, even demanded that reporters refrain from asking questions of the President during Oval Office photo opportunity sessions (Broadcasting 1982; Radolf 1987; Stein 1987; Roper 1985a, 1985b; Hertsgaard 1989: 133–43). Furthermore, administration officials can choose to regulate the contexts in which they communicate through the media. Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, for example, refused to debate on talk shows with, or even take questions from, a list of certain journalists and policy analysts he considered to be politically adversarial (Hertsgaard 1989: 61). Finally, administration officials can choose to withhold relevant information from the press altogether. During the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada, for instance, the administration, in a glaring act of press censorship, entirely barred the media from covering the invasion of Grenada (Friedrich 1983; Grunwald 1983). Cordoned off from the entire invasion, through deception and denial, the press was forced to rely solely on official government reports and sanitized Pentagon videotapes of the operation (Hertsgaard 1989: 205–37).

Finally, all presidents, because of the great attention their pronouncements attract, possess the ability to amplify issues and themes into major matters of concern. The key is repetition. In 1983, for example, polls showed a two-to-one public disapproval of President Reagan’s cutbacks in federal spending on education. In response, Michael Deaver orchestrated a twenty-five-stop “excellence in education” public relations campaign, emphasizing merit pay for teachers and increased classroom discipline. According to Deaver (quoted in Hertsgaard 1989: 48–49): “The President would say the same thing, but we had different visuals for every one of those stops. . . . It used to drive the President crazy, because repetition was so important. He’d get on that airplane and look at the speech and say, ‘Mike, I’m not going to give this same speech on education again, am I?’ I said, ‘Yeah, trust me, it’s going to work.’ And it did.”
Six weeks later, without any change in the administration's actual education policy, the polls showed the public supporting Reagan on education two-to-one. Saul Friedman, Knight-Rider journalist, observed (quoted in Hertsgaard 1989: 49), "They understood that to shift the fulcrum of the debate, you have to do it with repetition, which the President is very good at."

Reagan effectively capitalized on this power of repetition to "shift the fulcrum of the debate" in championing his Central America policy as well (Millman 1984; Hallin 1987; Cockburn 1987). In particular, through his unrelenting repetition, Reagan managed successfully to shift the focus of the public debate over the Contra war away from the question of the wisdom of supporting the disreputable Contra forces to that of the diabolic nature of the Sandinista regime (see R. Cohen 1986). By incessantly asserting that the Sandinistas were "hardline communists," "terrorists," "Marxist-Leninist dictators," and "Murder, Inc.,” Reagan was able to reframe the terms of the debate in a way that effectively undermined congressional opposition to his policy (Spence 1987: 183–87).

Thus, in its struggle to define the Central American reality from its perspective, the Central America peace movement confronted a formidable opponent in the Reagan White House. Besides possessing the obvious capacity to originate, define, and implement U.S. foreign policy, the Reagan administration also enjoyed the power, vis-à-vis the media, to initiate, anticipate, regulate, and amplify "facts," to establish a definition of the situation that justified its foreign policy. The administration's masterful media-relations machine exploited this power with great proficiency and success.

CONTESTING ADMINISTRATION FRAMES

Given the difficulties inherent in media norms and practices for grassroots challengers trying to shape public political discourse, and given the tremendous media advantages enjoyed by the Reagan administration, what strategies and resources were available to the Central America peace movement for using the media successfully to redefine Central America for the American people and Congress? The movement did not have the power, prominence, finances, and world-class media-relations machine of the White House. The movement did, however, enjoy certain attributes that afforded potential leverage against the White House position. Specifically, the movement was generating dramatic, often disruptive political actions. It had mobilized a grassroots base of tens of thousands of what seemed to be mostly ordinary people. Most of the reported evidence coming out of Central America seemed to corroborate its position. Also, its framings of Central America—especially the another-Vietnam and wayward-America frames—enjoyed high degrees of resonance with U.S. cultural values. Furthermore, the movement included a handful of organizers—most notably, Dennis Marker of Witness for Peace and the Pledge of Resistance, Cindy Buhl of the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy and the Central America Working Group, and Amanda Spake of the Caribbean Basin Information Project—who understood how to work the news industry to the movement’s advantage. These media-experienced organizers, working with thousands of other leaders and activists, managed successfully to exploit the movement's distinct attributes—its dramatic actions, grassroots base, empirical credibility, and cultural resonance—to help undermine, through the mass media, the administration’s framing of Central America. The following pages recount, mostly in these organizers’ own words, the key elements of their media strategy.10

Accentuate the Dramatic

Experienced movement organizers knew that to be newsworthy, they had to have a current, interesting story. So they worked to capitalize on the movement’s dramatic actions. Dennis Marker explains (1992):

My job was to translate Witness for Peace and Pledge philosophy into something the media could understand and be interested in and excited about. But why would journalists listen to a person they’ve never heard of? The only ways to get press attention are to have huge numbers, huge money, or a story that’s just so dramatic that they can’t resist. We didn’t have money or numbers. The only thing left was drama. And Witness for Peace and the Pledge were golden with drama. Really, they were screaming. They gave us a perfect press strategy.

For its public launching, Witness for Peace organized a press conference and a striking religious commissioning service to send off its first delegation. In preparation, Marker spent days on the phone, calling and inviting every journalist at every press outlet he could, including all of the major national newspapers, television stations, and wire services.

I would call and say, “Look, I’ve got something you’re not going to believe. Twenty U.S. citizens who are going to Nicaragua to the war zone. We don’t know if they’re going to make it back. These are Christians,
church people, some of them are pastors who are willing to risk their lives. This is major. I don’t think you want to miss it.” I pitched the risk angle very big because, at the time, it was very risky. Husbands and wives were actually traveling on different delegations because they didn’t want to orphan their kids, in case they got killed. We just didn’t know. Well, the media just ate it up. (Marker 1992)

Marker put out press releases publicizing the idea that the delegates were going to Nicaragua to be a “human shield”: ordinary Americans standing between the Nicaraguans and the Contras, using their bodies to shield innocent peasants from the deadly Contras. He has recalled (1992), “When you’re little, like us, you have to have one concept that is so striking that the press has to cover you, and for us, that was the ‘human shield.’ You don’t get many opportunities in life to have such a simple, marketable, dramatic concept that conveys so well what you’re trying to say.”

The drama strategy worked, as the Witness for Peace kickoff received widespread national media attention.11 With this success, Marker chose to employ the same strategy of accentuating the dramatic when it came to launching the Pledge of Resistance (Marker 1992): “With Witness for Peace, it was the drama of people putting their lives at risk. With the Pledge, it was the drama of confrontation: ‘We’re not going to passively take it. We’re laying down the gauntlet with massive civil disobedience and protest.’ It’s a little person’s way of drawing a line in the sand. And that worked too.”

Not only did the drama make Witness for Peace and the Pledge of Resistance media-worthy. It also helped to build important working relationships between Dennis Marker and news journalists. As he said (1992), “By the time we launched the Pledge, all the reporters were talking to me first call. They would hang up on someone else because they knew I might have something good. Once you get their attention, they’re willing to talk to you. Also, the media are like ‘blackbirds on a wire.’ You get one to go, then the others think, ‘We should be there, too,’ which is why you always get the same coverage on all three networks.”

**Appeal to the Credibility of Ordinary Folk**

A second component of the peace movement’s media strategy was to turn the apparent ordinariness of most activists into a reality-defining advantage. The tactic was to highlight, not most activists’ lack of expertise on inter-American relations, but their trustworthiness as ordinary,

neighbor-next-door, everyman and everywoman kind of people. Appealing to latent Jacksonian-populist values in the American cultural tradition—belief in the integrity of ordinary working citizens and distrust for centralized governmental elites—the movement’s media organizers counterposed the word of local activists against the word of Ronald Reagan and summoned people to choose between the two: “We worked to set up this choice for journalists and their readers: ‘You have to decide: do you believe Ronald Reagan or do you believe the local Baptist pastor? Because you can’t believe both.’ We pitched the idea that these are ordinary people, credible people, they could be from your local church, could be your pastor, your priest, from the school. Trustworthy folk. This could be your mother, your grandmother” (Marker 1992).

The strategy was to connect these ordinary people with area journalists for interviews, in order to undermine President Reagan’s version of Central America through their testimonies (Marker 1992):

> We would get the names of delegates before trips and tell journalists, “Just call this person in your city.” So, Presbyterian ministers would be out there telling reporters, “Well, yes, I’m the minister of this church in whatever town. And no, of course I’ve never been arrested before. But, I’ve been to Nicaragua, and I must act, out of conscience, to oppose what our government is doing there.” Well, who are people going to believe? This guy? Or Elliott Abrams? That’s the choice we wanted to confront people with.

**Cultivate New Media Contacts**

Projecting their Central America frames through the media required that activists build stronger links to the media. Thus, the movement organizers invested heavily in cultivating working relationships with reporters. The first step was getting the right attitude. According to Cindy Buh (1993), “You have to learn to like working with the press. People are mostly taught to see the press as an adversary. We’ve had to learn to see the press as our friends, to build collaborative relationships with them.”

The next step was establishing personal relationships with reporters and editors. Marker said (1992),

> The key is being personal, of finding ways to get in their faces, nicely. Big news reporters get 1,000 press releases a day, and they’re going to cover one story, maybe two. So your chances of getting through to them are nil
Saturate the Local News

Another key element of the Central America peace movement’s media strategy was to concentrate on generating extensive local news coverage. This tactic had four advantages. First, local news coverage was easier to generate than national coverage. Second, local news coverage could target key political states. Third, widespread local news coverage was more difficult for the movement’s opponents to counter. Fourth, extensive local news coverage hit the movement’s intended targets—the American public and Congress—at least as effectively as national news coverage. Local news not only reaches the public at a closer-to-home level, but local news, editorials, and letters-to-editors also exert a significant influence on the thinking and voting of area congressional representatives. Hence, the movement’s strategy was first to get major local news coverage, and then to saturate the local and regional press.

Part of the very purpose of first generating national news was to gain a reputation and credibility that would attract local news coverage: “The key was piggybacking. We created a national story. Then we went to our local people and said, ‘Look, just tell your Small-Potatoes Daily that this is covered in the New York Times and they’ll cover it.’ And they did” (Marker 1992).

According to Mike Clark (1992), Witness for Peace delegates enjoyed a notoriety that naturally attracted local press coverage. “At the grassroots level, press coverage was easy. We had people coming back from Nicaragua, which, in many places, was like coming back from Mars. People came home and were like stars. So, we got lots of free publicity, lots of television, radio, and newspaper coverage, at the grassroots level.”

Witness for Peace also worked on generating publicity in specialty publications, by soliciting information about delegates’ organizational, professional, hobby, or interest-group connections, and encouraging them to contact the publishers of any magazines or newsletters to which they were related:

If a pipefitter was going, we’d get the pipefitter press. If a nun, we’d get their religious order to cover it. I would call whoever: “Do you know that one of your board of directors is doing a really dramatic thing that was covered in Newsweek and the Washington Post?” Any connection these people had. I remember one delegate was a sewing machine salesman and we tried to get into Sewing Machine Trade magazine. “Have him call me.
Barrage with Empirical Contradictions

At the heart of the movement’s media strategy stood the tactic of relentlessly challenging White House Central America frames by churning out a deluge of contradictory evidence. When the White House blamed Central America’s turmoil on Soviet expansionism, the movement countered with details of the region’s epidemic injustice and repression. When the administration claimed human rights progress by the Salvadoran regime, the movement publicized its continuing, documented military and death-squad atrocities. To President Reagan’s assertion that the Contras were “Freedom Fighters” and “the moral equivalents of our founding fathers,” the movement replied with damning evidence of their rampant terrorist activities. White House claims to possessing the morally choiceworthy Central American policy were rebutted with the unremitting testimony of myriad religious and legal authorities and policy makers condemning the administration policy’s immorality, illegality, and ineffectiveness. Administration charges that the Sandinistas were creating a “Marxist-Leninist, anti-semitic, totalitarian dungeon” were met with signs of new-found political openness, fair elections, and social advancement in Nicaragua. White House disavowals of “another Vietnam” were countered with film footage of new U.S. military advisers arriving in San Salvador. State Department claims of Nicaraguan gunrunning to the FMLN rebels were refuted with statements of certain forthright State officials about the actual lack of verifying evidence. Denials of covert CIA operations were confronted with proof of U.S. harbor minings, terrorist manuals, and military supply operations. Taking advantage of the empirical evidence from Central America that supported their frames, movement organizers struggled to undermine White House credibility by contradicting every policy argument the administration advanced. Dennis Marker explained (1992):

Our whole strategy was to win a few and cast doubts in the minds of the rest. We had to use a “guerrilla strategy,” designed to plant doubts in the public mind, to “confuse” the public, so to speak. People were going to hear from us once a month, maybe, and from Reagan every day. He had the power to amplify and we didn’t. So, what could we do? Create uncertainty, so the public wouldn’t solidify around Reagan’s position, but say,

“Gee, I’ve been hearing contradictory things and I don’t know what to think.” So any time they’d throw out a line, we’d counter it. We thought if we could keep the public from totally believing Reagan, then they might not be so interested in paying for his policy. So we ran in and lobbed little somethings that would get attention, then ran back before we got creamed.

The movement employed a variety of sources and channels of information to contradict the President, including damaging news reports from Central America, critical film documentaries, published reports of human rights monitor groups, refugees’ stories, Central American activists on speaking tours in the U.S., reports from U.S. activists stationed in Central America, and the statements and testimony of critical Central America scholars, religious leaders, and policy analysts. Witness for Peace, which actually documented Contra atrocities in Nicaraguan war zones, was especially well situated to challenge the White House. According to Mike Clark (1992): “When Witness for Peace delegates returned, they had the opportunity to tell the news media what they had seen with their own eyes, which was a story that contradicted Reagan. And often it was possible to get those contrary stories out through the media.” Eventually, Witness for Peace became accepted by many U.S. politicians and journalists as a reliable source of information on the war in Nicaragua. This opened up opportunities for contributing to the public debate: “When we were the only source for information about Contra attacks, we were being quoted in Congress and the New York Times. We got access because we were the only people who were traveling out to the war zones. So reporters and congresspeople would quote us and use our information when debating Nicaragua” (Clark 1992).

Although the movement’s imperial-America frame lent itself most to countering the President’s characterization of Central America and his own policy, the another-Vietnam, wayward-America, and botched-diplomacy frames proved much more effective. The campaign to contradict the White House worked best when it appealed to the good in the U.S. and refrained from disparaging the bad. Doing so not only logically set up the possibility of isolating President Reagan and his policy, specifically, as the bad to be opposed—and not the U.S. as a whole. It also made movement arguments more plausible to average Americans, given their value commitments and worldviews (see Kenworthy 1988: 121). Throughout the decade, the movement especially strove to

Vietnam worked well at the grassroots. People viscerally reacted to getting embroiled in some two-bit third-world war not worth one American life. Initially that was Salvador, then Nicaragua. As late as our Countdown ’87 campaign, a consultant did focus groups and found that Vietnam still resonated so strongly with Americans. We actually did a television commercial hinting at Vietnam, that ran in swing states. It starts with a Nicaraguan soldier, but when you hear the bolt clicking back on his gun, he turns around and he’s not a Nicaraguan anymore, he’s an American. A clearly Hispanic campesino becomes the boy next door. It was a very powerful commercial.

Overall, the effort to contradict the White House was effective throughout the decade, as the movement did succeed in casting doubt in the public mind on the wisdom of President Reagan’s Central American policy.

But, for its part, the White House also took steps to counter the movement’s contradiction campaign. Sometimes, the administration was able successfully to smother the movement’s challenges in the press through the media advantages that it enjoyed. Elliott Abrams, for example, was able to choose the opponent against whom he would debate Central America on television. After a particularly bad performance against Bishop Thomas Gumbleton on the March 19, 1986, McNeel/Lehrer News Hour, for example, Abrams refused ever to debate Gumbleton again and demanded to debate less-informed, mainline liberals, such as Ted Kennedy.

Other times, developing political events in Central America—partly shaped by the Reagan administration for just such an effect—undermined the movement’s attempt to keep their issues in the spotlight. According to Cindy Buhl (1993), Salvadoran elections foiled movement efforts to focus attention on human rights abuses in El Salvador: “Duarte’s 1984 electioncreamed us, put Salvador off the agenda for years. You couldn’t get Congress to look at Salvador and we didn’t have a winnable Salvador vote until 1989. It was barely all we could do to keep some of the human rights issues alive during the Duarte regime.”

At other times, the administration received assistance from the political blunders of the Sandinistas and tactical mistakes by the movement’s congressional allies: “Some in Congress tried to give a more balanced approach to the Sandinistas, but then Daniel Ortega went to Moscow. Timing was not Ortega’s strong suit. Every time they tried to give a bal-

anced assessment of the Sandinistas, they would be burned and less likely to try again. Eventually, none of Reagan’s claims about the Sandinistas were opposed” (Buhl 1993).

Finally, sometimes, movement leaders declined to employ administration-contradicting tactics that promised to damage White House credibility because, at the time, they appeared too risky. Dennis Mark-er offers an example (1992):

The CIA got caught producing a terrorism comic book about how to make Molotov cocktails, how to slash tires on police cars, terrorist tactics. At first, the press covered it. Then Reagan said the comic was to promote democracy. And the press bought it. So, I said, “Let’s print up 10,000 translations, hold a press conference, and say we’re going to distribute them in inner-city America because we want to promote democracy there.” It was beautiful. It could not have failed. It would have forced the press to show Ronald Reagan to be directly, openly lying. Unfortunately, some of our people hated it. They said, “We don’t want to be associated with terrorism.” Oh! They just missed the point! Because we didn’t do that, Reagan’s argument was allowed to stand.

In most cases, movement efforts to use the media to challenge the President with evidence contradicting the administration’s framings of Central America succeeded in their intended effect. In certain other cases, however, they were neutralized by White House counteractions and the restraint of sometimes overly cautious congressional and movement leaders.

Employ Multiple Authorities and Arguments Simultaneously

Besides the tactics described above, also integral to the movement’s struggle to shape the public debate on Central America was the practice of “media triangulation,” that is, of drawing on multiple anti-administration authorities and advancing several anti-administration arguments simultaneously. According to Cindy Buhl (1993), “On Nicaragua, for example, the mantra was, ‘It’s illegal, it’s immoral, and it doesn’t work.’ People responded to that. If it’s illegal, immoral, and doesn’t work, what more do you need to know? And we had our moral people, our legal people, and people who could show why it wasn’t working.” Buhl went on to explain:

We divided it up into different specialties. The ACLU and the Center for National Security Studies took on the legal arguments against the policy. Then the churches were very good on the moral and theological argu-
ments and on human rights. They argued persuasively that this policy was simply immoral. Then we brought in foreign-policy types, academics and analysts, who argued that, even given Reagan’s objectives in Central America, this policy would simply not succeed. And that worked very well for us. All of those voices together commanded a hearing.

Regularly Promote New Story Lines

Finally, movement organizers maintained their voice in the media throughout the decade by regularly formulating and advancing fresh news story lines. Witness for Peace, for example, began with an inaugural press conference and commissioning service. One year later, they launched a “What We’ve Seen and Heard” media campaign. A year later, they promoted a new “Thousand Eyewitnesses” press campaign. In the following years, Witness for Peace helped devise a variety of campaigns, including the “Countdown ’87,” “Countdown ’88,” and “Days of Decision” campaigns. According to Dennis Marker (1992), “You must always try to find a new angle. Basically it’s all the same story, but you’re finding a new way to pitch it. That’s the game. We always asked, ‘How can we make this different, yet reinforce the same message?’ Reporters don’t have any problem with that. They understand it very well. They’re willing to print it, as long as you make it exciting and dramatic. So we would formulate different events and campaigns and just kept releasing these things.”

Witness for Peace also used a “Reagan Lies” campaign to promote a new story line (Marker 1992): “You up the ante. For a while we said, ‘The administration is getting it wrong, it’s not the truth.’ You beat around the bush. Then at some point you’ve got to go the next step and up the ante. So you directly charge, ‘They’re lying. Purposefully lying.’ You’ve got to do that, not only because it’s true, but also to maintain the interest, to keep up the drama with the press.”

To summarize, by accentuating their own dramatic actions, appealing to the credibility of ordinary Americans, carefully cultivating new media contacts, saturating local news outlets around the country, barring the administration with damaging contradictory evidence, posing multiple anti-administration authorities and arguments, and regularly promoting fresh news story lines, the Central America peace movement activists managed successfully to project their counterframings of Central America to and through the mass media, despite the difficulties presented by media norms and practices and by the White House’s immense media advantages and skills. In so doing, the movement was able to advance to the American public and Congress an alternative definition of the Central American situation that countered the Reagan administration’s and persuasively called for a major change in U.S. Central American policy. Consequently, as Central America increasingly proved the subject of a major political battle and not a political rollover, the early words of Secretary of State Alexander Haig—“Mr. President, this is one you can win”—seemed ever increasingly impetuous and presumptuous.

ADMINISTRATION COUNTERATTACKS

The Reagan administration, understandably, did not take the Central America peace movement’s relative media success and consequent political strength amicably. Nor was it prepared to consider the possibility of suffering ultimate defeat. To strengthen the chances of prevailing in the public debate over Central America, and particularly over Nicaragua, certain members of the administration took more aggressive actions to promote and defend the White House’s position and to undermine the opposition. In their covert, coercive, and sometimes illegal nature, these countermovement actions took on a qualitatively different character than the regular press-management work of the Deaver-Gergen-Baker media-relations team. The remainder of this chapter examines these more aggressive discourse-influencing administration actions.

William Casey, President Reagan’s CIA director and fervent champion of the Contras, perceived very early in the decade that winning the domestic political battle for Central America would be difficult. He knew it would require concerted efforts to shape the news media and influence public opinion, efforts he was prepared to foster.13 The CIA, however, was prohibited by the 1947 National Security Act and 1981 Presidential Executive Order 12333 from engaging in domestic operations intended to influence U.S. political processes, public opinion, or the media. To formally skirt these bans, in 1982, Casey transferred the CIA’s senior overseas-propaganda specialist, Walter Raymond, Jr., to the NSC. There Raymond began coordinating, along with Oliver North, a major “public diplomacy” operation designed to influence and manipulate media, congressional, and public perceptions of Central America (Kornbluh and Byrne 1993: 4).14 Raymond, who heralded