

**“Not In Our Name”:
The Central American Sanctuary Movement and the Struggle for Salvadoran Asylum
Rights**

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Paper

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Process Paper

I first learned about the Sanctuary Movement from the book *Everyone Who is Gone is Here*. As someone interested in foreign policy and global human rights, I was intrigued by the Sanctuary Movement. I then attended a local lecture by Aviva Chomsky about the history of political turmoil in Central America to gather further information. The information I gleaned showed me that the movement directly relates to this year's theme of rights and responsibilities in history. The Sanctuary Movement concerned itself with the rights of Salvadorans. American movement members believed that it was their responsibility as citizens of the country that was stoking the violence in El Salvador to use their rights to hold the US government accountable for both foreign policy and violation of Salvadoran rights under the Refugee Act of 1980.

Because the bulk of the movement took place in the western United States, most primary sources are archived at universities in Arizona and California and thus inaccessible. When I told my grandmother about the project, she said she knew people who had been involved in the movement. She connected me with activists, as well as a Salvadoran refugee. I interviewed them over Zoom to gain firsthand accounts of people's experiences. In addition, I used Google Scholar to find peer-reviewed research on the movement. I read articles on liberation theology, US foreign policy and intervention in Central America, how activism functions, and the Sanctuary Movement itself. I supplemented these secondary sources with primary sources from presidential libraries, government websites, and newspapers.

I created an outline using the notes I took while reading my sources. I began to write my paper, continuing to do research while writing and revising it. After I finished a full draft, I sent it to a history teacher and a professor who studies social movements and implemented their feedback before I submitted my paper. After receiving feedback from the regional and state judges, I streamlined the historical background, added more information on the impacts of the movement, and expanded my argument with new primary sources.

My historical argument is that the Sanctuary Movement leveraged members' rights and sense of duty as Christians and citizens of the US to compel the US government to meet its obligations to Salvadoran refugees under domestic and international law. Prior to their efforts, the US was not upholding the Refugee Act of 1980. Movement members felt a responsibility for their country's actions and that sense of responsibility motivated their collective action that ultimately secured asylum rights. My topic is historically significant because the Sanctuary Movement was able to save the lives of thousands of Salvadorans and achieve lasting change through the passage of the 1990 Immigration Act, which ensured asylum rights for people across the globe seeking asylum in the US. More broadly, it demonstrates the power of civil society, and social movements specifically, to hold government accountable to its laws and people through organizing and appealing to people's moral compasses.

Introduction

The Refugee Act of 1980 was the United States' first comprehensive policy for refugee admissions. The Act required "fair and equitable treatment of refugees in the United States, regardless of their country of origin,"¹ bringing the US into compliance with international law.² Yet immigration lawyers soon noticed a troubling trend; 98% of Salvadoran asylum seekers were being denied, far above the 75% global average.³ This was despite an ongoing civil war in El Salvador in which over 40,000 people had been killed in the government's efforts to repress political opposition.⁴ In response, the Sanctuary Movement emerged in 1982. A network of American churches that would give "sanctuary" to undocumented Salvadoran refugees, the movement addressed the failure of the US government to secure migrants' rights under the Refugee Act. Grounded in moral and political responsibility, movement-sponsored activism led Congress to grant asylum to Salvadorans and include an important provision in the 1990 Immigration Act,⁵ reforming the asylum process and securing asylum rights for people arriving in the US.

Origins of the Refugee Crisis

El Salvador has a long history of political turmoil. Starting in the 1930s, a series of military dictators brutally suppressed peasant, worker, and student protests.⁶ The government justified violence as necessary to prevent a communist takeover, but even modest reform efforts were

¹ Carter, Jimmy. "Refugee Act of 1980 Statement on Signing S. 643 Into Law." Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/250088>

² Altemus, Michele. "The Sanctuary Movement." *Whittier Law Review*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1988, pp. 683-722.

³ Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 2024.

⁴ Bentancur, Belisario, Reinaldo Figueredo Planchart, and Thomas Buergenthal. "From Madness to Hope: the 12-year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador." *United States Institute for Peace*, https://transitionaljusticedata.org/public_files/reportTCID135.pdf.

⁵ Smith, Christian. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

⁶ Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 2024.

deemed “communist” and any opposition was labeled “insurgency,” including “worker strikes, unionization efforts, and public demonstrations.”⁷ In response, a civil war broke out in 1979 as left-wing guerilla groups fought widespread government repression and economic inequality.⁸ The military used death squads to root out resistance and suspected sympathizers, “burning crops, killing animals, destroying villages, and torturing and murdering civilians.”⁹ Over 9,000 people were “disappeared.”¹⁰ Fearing the spread of communism in Cold War era Latin America, the US backed El Salvador’s military with weapons¹¹ and the US Army trained members of these death squads,¹² many of whom were later implicated in civilian massacres like El Mozote, where a battalion raped, tortured, and murdered almost 1,000 villagers, half of whom were children.¹³

By 1981, over 300,000 Salvadorans had fled or been forced from their homes as violence spiked. Many arrived in the US and started filing asylum petitions under the Refugee Act.¹⁴ This quickly revealed the weaknesses of the Act, which defined a refugee as,

“Any person who is outside any country of such person’s nationality... and who is unable or unwilling to return to... that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion...”¹⁵

⁷ Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 2024. Pg. 15.

⁸ Bentancur, Belisario, Reinaldo Figueredo Planchart, and Thomas Buergenthal. “From Madness to Hope: the 12-year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador.” *United States Institute for Peace*, 1993, https://transitionaljusticedata.org/public_files/reportTCID135.pdf.

⁹ Ching, Erik Kristofer. *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador: A Battle Over Memory*. University Of North Carolina Press, 2016.

¹⁰ “El Salvador - International Commission on Missing Persons.” *International Commission on Missing Persons*, 28 May 2024, icmp.int/the-missing/where-are-the-missing/el-salvador/.

¹¹ Gill, Lesley. *The School of the Americas*. Duke University Press, 2004.

¹² Nelson-Pallmeyer, Jack. *School of Assassins*. Films Media Group, 1994.

¹³ Bentancur, Belisario, Reinaldo Figueredo Planchart, and Thomas Buergenthal. “From Madness to Hope: the 12-year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador.” *United States Institute for Peace*, 1993, https://transitionaljusticedata.org/public_files/reportTCID135.pdf.

¹⁴ Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 2024.

¹⁵ “S.643 - 96th Congress (1979-1980): Refugee Act of 1979.” *Congress.gov*, 2020, [www.congress.gov/bills/96th-congress/senate-bill/643](https://www.congress.gov/bills/96/congress/senate/bills/643).

When President Jimmy Carter signed the Act, his goal had been to support human rights by codifying a precise definition of “refugee” and ending the ideological decision-making that previously defined refugee admissions. Prior to the Act, the US privileged refugees fleeing communist governments given the backdrop of the Cold War. But Carter wanted a fairer system that would evaluate claims on a case-by-case basis. In a speech, he argued that “to help these refugees is a simple human duty.”¹⁶ Unfortunately, the Act also required the State Department to preside over the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), allowing it to define “fear of persecution.”¹⁷ As a result, administrations could continue to politicize the legitimacy of asylum applications, despite the goal of the reform.

When President Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, he allied with the Salvadoran government and encouraged its military to stamp out all perceived communist influences by any means necessary,¹⁸ deeming the country as central to US anti-communist policy in the region.¹⁹ Given this alliance, the State Department downplayed Salvadoran refugees’ “fear of persecution.” Instead, it defined displaced Salvadorans as economic migrants, rather than political refugees, and deported them. INS claimed, “Almost everyone in the world would be better off in the US,” arguing that a poor economy and generalized violence were insufficient justifications for asylum.²⁰ In this manner, the Reagan administration was able to eschew its responsibilities to refugees. Political calculations overrode legal obligations and humanitarian concerns, undermining Carter’s intent.

¹⁶ Macekura, Stephen. “‘For Fear of Persecution’: Displaced Salvadorans and U.S. Refugee Policy in the 1980s.” *Journal of Policy History* vol. 23, no. 3, 2011, pp. 357–380. Pg. 359.

¹⁷ Macekura, Stephen. “‘For Fear of Persecution’: Displaced Salvadorans and U.S. Refugee Policy in the 1980s.” *Journal of Policy History* vol. 23, no. 3, 2011, pp. 357–380.

¹⁸ Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 2024. Pg. 30.

¹⁹ Reagan, Ronald. “Address to the Nation on United States Policy in Central America.” *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*. www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-united-states-policy-central-america.

²⁰ Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 2024. Pg. 57.

Yet many saw a legitimate “fear of persecution.” Marina Ordonez recounted her experiences in El Salvador, saying, “A lot of students were killed and several were very badly wounded. I was grazed by a bullet.” As she explained, “If you were a student, you were considered a revolutionary or a communist.... There were a lot of people disappearing, especially teachers, students, priests; we were very persecuted.”²¹ Marina’s experiences reveal the pervasive fear that marked life in El Salvador and the impunity with which the military targeted suspected opposition groups. This logic permeated the asylum determinations of the Reagan administration; they too assumed that Salvadoran refugees were communists and did not want to admit them.²²

Immigration attorneys sounded the alarm.²³ The INS denied almost every asylum application and was “issuing boilerplate responses to reject Salvadorans’ asylum claims en masse.”²⁴ Other INS agents told Salvadorans they had no right to apply for asylum and coerced them into signing forms that waived their right to do so, expediting their removal from the US.²⁵ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees conducted an investigation and found that the US was following a “systematic practice” of denying claims and deporting Salvadoran applicants, regardless of the strength of their claims and in violation of UN statutes.²⁶ The Reagan administration’s refusal to meet its obligations under the Act led the Sanctuary Movement to take action.

²¹ Ordonez, Marina. Personal Interview. February 12, 2025.

²² Macekura, Stephen. “‘For Fear of Persecution’: Displaced Salvadorans and U.S. Refugee Policy in the 1980s.” *Journal of Policy History* vol. 23, no. 3, 2011, pp. 357–380.

²³ “Salvadoran Refugees Challenge U.S. Stand.” *The New York Times*, 13, April 1982, A3, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/04/13/us/salvadoran-refugees-challenge-us-stand.html>

²⁴ Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 30 Jan. 2024. Pg. 37

²⁵ Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 30 Jan. 2024.

²⁶ Thornton, Mary. “Refusing Asylum to Salvadorans May Violate Pact, U.N. Probe Finds,” *Washington Post*, 31, January 1982, A17.

The Sanctuary Movement

The Sanctuary Movement was founded by Arizonans Jim Fife, a Presbyterian minister, and John Corbett, a Quaker, when they learned that INS was illegally deporting Salvadorans. They declared themselves “pro bono coyotes,” helping Salvadorans enter the US and sheltering them in churches and houses, before relocating them to areas with limited immigration enforcement.²⁷ Fife and Corbett modeled this on the Underground Railroad, arguing that the church must now defend human rights after failing to do so during the Holocaust.²⁸ Religious congregations were effective sites of recruitment, as movement messaging echoed church doctrine. Movement leadership was drawn from the clergy, who centered justice for the poor²⁹ and argued that, as people of the church, “obedience to God” required them to “extend the sanctuary of the church to undocumented people.”³⁰ Human rights became central to church agendas and imbued church leaders and members with a sense of spiritual responsibility to act. As a result, the movement grew quickly, with almost 70,000 members across 150 church congregations by the mid-1980s.³¹

The immediate goal was to meet the needs of Salvadoran refugees and advocate for their legal right to asylum. Some members helped with asylum applications, others with shelter, supplies, food, money, and border crossings.³² Movement members argued that their actions were lawful given the circumstances, asserting that it was the US government committing the crimes by illegally deporting asylum-seekers. They called their work “civil initiative,” rather than “civil

²⁷ Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 2024 Pg. 60.

²⁸ Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 2024 Pg. 60.

²⁹ Levine, Daniel H. “Assessing the Impacts of Liberation Theology in Latin America.” *The Review of Politics*, vol.50, no. 2, 1988, pp. 241–263.

³⁰ Crittenden, Ann. *Sanctuary: A story of American Conscience and the Law in Collision*. New York: Grove, 1988, Pg. 72.

³¹ Smith, Christian. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

³² Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 2024.

disobedience,” which underscored their argument that they were enforcing existing laws and attempting to transform them into standard legal practices.³³ In this manner, the Sanctuary Movement was distinct from other social movements at the time; members saw themselves as “doing justice” rather than “undoing injustice” and focused on using community to extend human rights to those in need.³⁴

Organizations used personal encounters with refugees to galvanize further action, generating moral outrage as refugee narratives contradicted those coming from Reagan about the on-the-ground reality in El Salvador.³⁵ In an address to the nation, Reagan warned of a communist threat “at our doorstep” to justify US involvement, claiming El Salvador was “the stage for a bold attempt by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Nicaragua to install communism by force throughout the hemisphere.”³⁶ But as one movement member said, through personal encounters, “People could see that these were not radical, scary Marxists, but people with families and kids that had endured absolutely horrible experiences.”³⁷ This first-hand knowledge was reinforced by the large presence of church missionaries in Central America, who sent information to their congregations about the impacts of US foreign policy.³⁸ It became clear to movement members that not only was the US tolerating human rights abuses, it was facilitating them, creating a sense of personal culpability that motivated further action.

³³ Corbett, Jim. “Sanctuary, Basic Rights, and Humanity’s Fault Lines: A Personal Essay.” *Weber Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1988, www.weber.edu/weberjournal/Journal_Archives/Archive_A/Vol_5-1/JCorbettEss.html.

³⁴ Uhlmann, Natascha Elena. “The Sanctuary Movement Put U.S. Foreign Policy on Trial.” *In These Times*, 6 June 2024, inthesetimes.com/article/the-sanctuary-movement-put-u-s-foreign-policy-on-trial.

³⁵ Smith, Christian. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

³⁶ Reagan, Ronald. “Address to the Nation on United States Policy in Central America.” *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum*. www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-united-states-policy-central-america.

³⁷ Smith, Christian. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. University of Chicago Press, 1996. Pg. 152.

³⁸ Smith, Christian. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

In reaction, the movement became more overtly political.³⁹ Participants traveled to El Salvador to offer active protection,⁴⁰ testified before Congress,⁴¹ and led peaceful protests within the US to bring awareness and draw more people into the movement.⁴² Former nun and peace activist, Alice Waco, traveled to Central America during the 1980s. She said, “It was amazing how many Americans were there to protect the people.”⁴³ This shift created divisions in the movement. Some people wanted to focus on humanitarian aid to avoid undermining the movement’s moral appeal.⁴⁴ But others argued that, as American citizens, they were responsible for the actions of their government and, therefore, had an obligation to use that status to demand change. The government not only needed to meet its obligations under the Refugee Act, but also change the foreign policy at the core of the refugee crisis. As activist Earl Herr said, he “couldn’t tolerate what [Reagan] was doing to our neighboring countries to the south.”⁴⁵ Catholic priest Roy Bourgeois agreed, “Not in our name will you do this.... It is our responsibility as US citizens to use our rights to resist.”⁴⁶ Those who advocated for political activism in addition to humanitarian aid prevailed.

Given the need to shift government policy to adequately address the refugee crisis, it was this strategy that ultimately made the movement so impactful. The movement successfully translated moral outrage born from a sense of responsibility into sustained political action and widespread consciousness-raising. As Professor William Farmer of Southern Methodist University said, the movement “is probably the single most successful effort to help people become aware of

³⁹ Applebome, Peter. “In Sanctuary Movement, Unabated Strength but Shifting Aims.” *The New York Times*, 27 Oct. 1987, www.nytimes.com/1987/10/27/us/in-sanctuary-movement-unabated-strength-but-shifting-aims.html.

⁴⁰ Waco, Alice. Personal Interview. February 9, 2025.

⁴¹ “HR 4447, Extended Voluntary Departure for Salvadorans.” *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on the Rules of the House*, Washington, D.C., 1985.

⁴² Chomsky, Aviva. *Central America’s Forgotten History*. Beacon Press, 2021.

⁴³ Waco, Alice. Personal Interview. February 9, 2025.

⁴⁴ Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 30 Jan. 2024.

⁴⁵ Herr, Earl. Personal Interview. October 20, 2024.

⁴⁶ Nelson-Pallmeyer, Jack. *School of Assassins*. Films Media Group, 1994.

our policies in foreign countries.... When people see and listen to the refugees, they are transformed. It's not mainstream, but it's having an effect on the mainstream."⁴⁷ Congressional leaders reported being inundated with mail from their constituents, with over 75% of all letters imploring them to end US support for El Salvador. Representative Clarence Long (D-MD) said, "I've never gotten so much reaction on any other issue."⁴⁸ As Congress failed to respond, activists became more disruptive in their methods, staging marches, blockades, and occupations.⁴⁹ The Reagan administration finally took notice and the Justice Department took action.

Movement Impacts

In 1985, the Justice Department indicted Fife, Corbett, and other movement participants for alien-smuggling and conspiracy.⁵⁰ The government prosecutor challenged the narrative that the movement was humanitarian in nature, instead arguing, "The movement was exposed for what it was, a political movement that was designed to viciously attack the Reagan administration's policy in Central America," claiming that the movement's religious motivations were nothing more than a "façade."⁵¹ But the highly publicized prosecutions simply raised the movement's profile and galvanized further action. As Fife said, "You can't stop a movement of faith by putting people in jail."⁵² In response, eighty religious, refugee, and legal assistance organizations filed a suit to stop the sanctuary prosecutions, grant safe haven to Central Americans, and reform US foreign policy.⁵³

⁴⁷ Applebome, Peter. "In Sanctuary Movement, Unabated Strength but Shifting Aims." *The New York Times*, 27 Oct. 1987, www.nytimes.com/1987/10/27/us/in-sanctuary-movement-unabated-strength-but-shifting-aims.html.

⁴⁸ Smith, Christian. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. University of Chicago Press, 1996. Pg. 163.

⁴⁹ Smith, Christian. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. University of Chicago Press, 1996. Pg. 163.

⁵⁰ McCorkle, Beth. "A Federal Grand Jury Has Indicted 16 People." *United Press International*, January 14, 1985.

⁵¹ Applebome, Peter. "In Sanctuary Movement, Unabated Strength but Shifting Aims." *The New York Times*, 27 Oct. 1987, www.nytimes.com/1987/10/27/us/in-sanctuary-movement-unabated-strength-but-shifting-aims.html.

⁵² Applebome, Peter. "Sanctuary Movement: New Hopes After Trial." *The New York Times*, 6 May 1986, www.nytimes.com/1986/05/06/us/sanctuary-movement-new-hopes-after-trial.html.

⁵³ Perla, Hector, and Susan Bibler Coutin. "Legacies and Origins of the 1980s US–Central American Sanctuary Movement." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2009, pp. 7-19.

While the government tried to dismiss the lawsuit multiple times, it eventually settled, handing the movement a major victory; 300,000 rejected asylum seekers won the right to reapply and receive a fair hearing.⁵⁴

In addition, sanctuary activists encouraged municipal governments to declare themselves sanctuary cities. Within three years, twenty cities agreed to curtail their cooperation with INS to reduce deportations, significantly limiting the effectiveness of anti-immigration efforts.⁵⁵ But activists also advocated for legislation to reform the asylum process. After meeting with a group of Salvadoran refugees, Congressman Joe Moakley (D-MA) became the movement's most ardent supporter, introducing bills to both cut foreign aid to El Salvador and provide temporary protection to Salvadoran refugees.⁵⁶ In a Dear Colleague letter, he wrote, "This legislation is a much-needed humanitarian measure that could save many lives."⁵⁷ With his help, the movement secured reduced military aid to El Salvador and a provision in the 1990 Immigration Act, which created Temporary Protected Status (TPS), allowing those who received it to live and work in the US while awaiting an asylum determination.⁵⁸ Salvadorans were the first beneficiaries of TPS, later extended to hundreds of thousands worldwide.⁵⁹ These long-term crowning policy achievements were in

⁵⁴ Smith, Christian. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

⁵⁵ Cottle, Jennie. "How "Sanctuary Cities" in the US Stand up to Federal Immigration Enforcement." *Policy Shift*, 2018, <https://www.policy-shift.com/single-post/2018/07/26/Sanctuary-Cities-How-local-policies-stand-up-to-immigration-enforcement>.

⁵⁶ Krauss, Clifford. "Washington at Work; Religion and Politics Become Fused in Congressman's District, and Heart." *The New York Times*, 23 Aug. 1990, www.nytimes.com/1990/08/23/us/washington-work-religion-politics-become-fused-congressman-s-district-heart.html.

⁵⁷ Moakley, John. "Support Moakley-Deconcini Bill to Protect Central American Refugees." *Omeka.net*, 2025, moakleyarchive.omeka.net/files/show/2907. Accessed 10 Apr. 2025.

⁵⁸ Moakley, John. "Support Moakley-Deconcini Bill to Protect Central American Refugees." *Omeka.net*, 2025, moakleyarchive.omeka.net/files/show/2907. Accessed 10 Apr. 2025.

⁵⁹ Perla, Hector, and Susan Bibler Coutin. "Legacies and Origins of the 1980s US–Central American Sanctuary Movement." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2009, pp. 7–19.

addition to the short-term aid the movement provided to over 13,000 asylum-seekers, potentially saving their lives.⁶⁰

The legacy of the Sanctuary Movement endures. Almost 600 sanctuary cities continue to resist immigration enforcement in their jurisdictions, protecting people with limited rights.⁶¹ Activists developed an extensive network of immigrant rights organizations,⁶² which continue to provide social services and advocacy for migrants.⁶³ Yet, at the same time, the refugee crisis gave rise to heightened anti-immigrant sentiment, which persists to this day. Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) successfully tied anti-immigrant narratives to US political goals in El Salvador, stating, “If Central America falls, we’re going to have 10, 15, 20 million refugees flooding across our borders who do not speak English and do not have jobs.”⁶⁴ This narrative shaped the perspective of a large share of the American population and polls in 1984 showed that more than 50% of respondents felt that the US was letting in too many Central Americans, whom they saw as a threat.⁶⁵ While communist fears faded, xenophobia persists,⁶⁶ and Americans remain divided on their obligations to migrants, with anti-immigration sentiments driving the recent presidential election.⁶⁷

Conclusion

The Sanctuary Movement arose from a sense of responsibility to Salvadoran refugees denied asylum protections, as loopholes in the Refugee Act allowed political priorities to

⁶⁰ Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 2024.

⁶¹ Cottle, Jennie. “How “Sanctuary Cities” in the US Stand up to Federal Immigration Enforcement.” *Policy Shift*, 2018, <https://www.policy-shift.com/single-post/2018/07/26/Sanctuary-Cities-How-local-policies-stand-up-to-immigration-enforcement>.

⁶² Perla, Hector, and Susan Bibler Coutin. “Legacies and Origins of the 1980s US–Central American Sanctuary Movement.” *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2009, pp. 7-19.

⁶³ Hernandez, Gabriela. Personal Interview. February 11, 2025.

⁶⁴ Macekura, Stephen. “‘For Fear of Persecution’: Displaced Salvadorans and U.S. Refugee Policy in the 1980s.” *Journal of Policy History*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2011. Pg. 367.

⁶⁵ Gallup/Newsweek Poll, June 1984, www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll.ipoll.html.

⁶⁶ Macekura, Stephen. “‘For Fear of Persecution’: Displaced Salvadorans and U.S. Refugee Policy in the 1980s.” *Journal of Policy History*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2011.

⁶⁷ Jordan, Miriam. “Voters Were Fed up over Immigration. They Voted for Trump.” *The New York Times*, 6 Nov. 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/11/06/us/trump-immigration-border.html.

overshadow humanitarian concerns and legal obligations. Reagan used the ambiguity inherent in “fear of persecution” to skirt legal responsibility under the Act and undermine its intent. Drawing on their moral responsibility as Christians and their political responsibilities as US citizens, sanctuary members used their own rights and resources to help those in need and advocate for changes to the law. The Act had little impact until the movement’s collective action pressured Congress to pass TPS, bringing to fruition Carter’s goal of an equitable refugee system rooted in human rights. As the movement demonstrates, when governments fail to meet their obligations under the law, citizens can hold them accountable and create lasting change. Thousands of lives were saved and a crucial piece of US immigration legislation was enacted, securing the rights of refugees seeking asylum in the US.

These are important lessons for the present. President Donald Trump has revoked TPS for certain groups⁶⁸ and demonstrated that governments may ignore, if not revoke rights,⁶⁹ which are only as strong as the government’s willingness to respect and enforce them. El Salvador is once again in the news as its president colludes with the US to support controversial deportations that subvert immigrants’ due process rights.⁷⁰ But the Sanctuary Movement shows that, by appealing to people’s moral compasses, a critical mass of activists can effect change. The movement also demonstrates that today’s “border crisis” is actually a long-standing foreign policy issue.

⁶⁸ Hesson, Ted. “Trump Revokes Legal Status for 530,000 Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans.” *Reuters*, 21 Mar. 2025, www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-revokes-legal-status-530000-cubans-haitians-nicaraguans-venezuelans-2025-03-21/.

⁶⁹ Broadwater, Luke. “Joe Rogan, Voices on the Right Raise Alarm over Trump’s Immigration Moves.” *The New York Times*, 1 Apr. 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/04/01/us/politics/trump-immigration-joe-rogan-conservatives.html.

⁷⁰ Kanno-Youngs, Zolan, Hamed Aleaziz, Alan Feuer, Devlin Barrett, Julie Turkewitz, Jonathan Swan, Maggie Haberman, and Annie Correal. “Behind Trump’s Deal to Deport Venezuelans to El Salvador’s Most Feared Prison.” *The New York Times*, 30 Apr. 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/30/us/politics/trump-deportations-venezuela-el-salvador.html>.

Americans can hold the government accountable there as well by using their rights to demand humane foreign policy.

Annotated Bibliography

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Applebome, Peter. "Sanctuary Movement: New Hopes After Trial." *The New York Times*, 6 May 1986, www.nytimes.com/1986/05/06/us/sanctuary-movement-new-hopes-after-trial.html.

This source discusses the sanctuary trials. I used it to show how the Justice Department conceptualized the Sanctuary Movement, as well as the defiant reaction of Fife to the prosecutions. This demonstrates how, despite the Reagan administration's best efforts, the movement persevered and grew in the wake of the trials.

Applebome, Peter. "In Sanctuary Movement, Unabated Strength but Shifting Aims." *The New York Times*, 27 Oct. 1987, www.nytimes.com/1987/10/27/us/in-sanctuary-movement-unabated-strength-but-shifting-aims.html.

This primary source explains movement strategy. I used it to discuss the shift from direct humanitarian aid to political activism. This created divisions in the movement, but ultimately made it more successful.

Bentancur, Belisario, Reinaldo Figueredo Planchart, and Thomas Buergenthal. "From Madness to Hope: the 12-year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador." *United States Institute for Peace*, 1993, https://transitionaljusticedata.org/public_files/reportTCID135.pdf.

This is a United Nations report on the investigation into the atrocities that took place during the Salvadoran civil war. I used it to discuss the widespread human rights abuses that took place with US support and how this set the stage for the refugee crisis.

Broadwater, Luke. "Joe Rogan, Voices on the Right Raise Alarm over Trump's Immigration Moves." *The New York Times*, 1 Apr. 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/04/01/us/politics/trump-immigration-joe-rogan-conservatives.html.

This is a recent news article that demonstrates Americans' rising concerns over Trump's willingness to subvert immigrant rights. I used it in the conclusion to highlight how rights are only secure as long as the government abides by them, demonstrating their potential fragility.

Carter, Jimmy. "Refugee Act of 1980 Statement on Signing S. 643 into Law." *The American Presidency Project*, 2024, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/refugee-act-1980-statement-signing-s-643-into-law.

This document is a transcript of a speech given by Jimmy Carter after signing the Refugee Act of 1980. He believed that the Act would lead to a fairer asylum process and change the number of asylum-seekers the US admitted from certain countries. I used this source to discuss the intention of the Refugee Act so that I could compare Carter's goals to Reagan's implementation.

Corbett, Jim. "Sanctuary, Basic Rights, and Humanity's Fault Lines: A Personal Essay." *Weber Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1988, www.weber.edu/weberjournal/Journal_Archives/Archive_A/Vol_5-1/JCorbettEss.html.

This is an essay written by one of the founders of the Sanctuary Movement discussing movement strategy. I used it to explain how the Sanctuary Movement conceptualized its work differently than other movements at the time in order to highlight its unique approach.

Gallup/Newsweek Poll, June 1984, www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll.ipoll.html.

This is a Gallup Poll on anti-immigrant sentiments at the height of the Sanctuary Movement. It demonstrates that while many people were moved by the plight of Salvadorans, a significant percentage of the population felt that the United States should reduce the number of Central American immigrants in the country. I used it to highlight the rise of anti-immigrant beliefs to the present and emphasize different perspectives on the goals of the movement.

Hernandez, Gabriela. Personal Interview. February 11, 2025.

I interviewed Gabriela about her current immigrant rights activism and how it was inspired by the 1980s Sanctuary Movement. She works with a group called ALMAS Libres, which organizes different groups at the state and national levels to fight for fair immigration reform. I learned about the inner workings of the modern Sanctuary Movement and its current challenges from her.

Herr, Earl. Personal Interview. October 20, 2024.

I interviewed Earl Herr over Zoom in October 2024. He provided insights about the kinds of activism in which movement members participated. Through interviewing Earl, I gained a deeper understanding of what motivated people to get involved in the movement, as well as what people did to protect Salvadorans from the US and Salvadoran governments.

Hesson, Ted. "Trump Revokes Legal Status for 530,000 Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans." *Reuters*, 21 Mar. 2025, www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-revokes-legal-status-530000-cubans-haitians-nicaraguans-venezuelans-2025-03-21/.

This is a recent news article discussing the Trump administration's decision to revoke TPS for certain groups. I used it to discuss how governments may revoke rights at will and argue that citizens are obligated to hold them accountable.

“HR 4447, Extended Voluntary Departure for Salvadorans.” *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on the Rules of the House*, Washington, D.C., 1985.

This is a recording of a hearing in which sanctuary activists testified before Congress. I used this source to discuss how the movement advocated for legislative change. The resultant legislative change was the main triumph of the movement.

Jordan, Miriam. “Voters Were Fed up over Immigration. They Voted for Trump.” *The New York Times*, 6 Nov. 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/11/06/us/trump-immigration-border.html.

This article discusses how anti-immigrant sentiments motivated American voters in the 2024 election. I used this source to discuss how anti-immigrant sentiment persists to the present and continues to divide Americans. This shows how many Americans had a different perspective on the goals of the Sanctuary Movement.

Kanno-Youngs, Zolan, Hamed Aleaziz, Alan Feuer, Devlin Barrett, Julie Turkewitz, Jonathan Swan, Maggie Haberman, and Annie Correal. “Behind Trump's Deal to Deport Venezuelans to El Salvador's Most Feared Prison.” *The New York Times*, 30 Apr. 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/30/us/politics/trump-deportations-venezuela-el-salvador.html>.

This is a recent news article on the Trump administration's efforts to deport undocumented Venezuelans to a prison in El Salvador. I used it in the conclusion to highlight

how El Salvador's government is once again allied with the US government in an effort to subvert immigration law.

Krauss, Clifford. "Washington at Work; Religion and Politics Become Fused in Congressman's District, and Heart." *The New York Times*, 23 Aug. 1990, www.nytimes.com/1990/08/23/us/washington-work-religion-politics-become-fused-congressman-s-district-heart.html.

This is an article about Joe Moakley and his support for Sanctuary Movement. I used this source to show how he helped the Sanctuary Movement achieve legislative successes and his motivations for this work.

McCorkle, Beth. "A Federal Grand Jury Has Indicted 16 People." *United Press International*, January 14, 1985.

This source discusses the indictment of sanctuary activists in 1985 and the Justice Department's response to the movement. Once the movement became a significant threat to the Reagan administration, the Justice Department decided to prosecute movement members. I used it to show that the administration argued that the movement was politically, not religiously, motivated in an effort to undermine the activists' moral appeal.

Office of the Historian. "Milestones: 1977–1980 - Office of the Historian." *State.gov*, 2019, history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/human-rights.

This document is a summary of the Carter administration's human rights work by the Office of the Historian. It discusses how the administration dealt with the Central American

revolutions. I used this source to understand the Carter administration's human rights work and how the Reagan administration reversed that work.

Ordonez, Marina. Personal Interview. February 12, 2025.

Marina Ordonez lived in El Salvador during the 1980s and watched as friends, teachers, and fellow students were disappeared or shot before her eyes. My interview with Marina gave me a first-hand account of the dangers the citizens of El Salvador faced and I used it to discuss why there was a legitimate fear of persecution. I also used it to discuss how the government targeted certain groups for violence.

Reagan, Ronald. "Address to the Nation on United States Policy in Central America." *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*. www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-united-states-policy-central-america.

This speech by Reagan was given to the nation to garner support for Cold War efforts in Central America. He argued that because Central America was extremely close to the US southern border, it was an imminent threat to US security. I used this speech to show how Reagan's administration stepped away from the humanitarian approach of the Carter administration to instead center the threat of communism in foreign policy.

"S.358 - 101st Congress (1989-1990): Immigration Act of 1990." *Congress.gov*, 2019, www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/358.

The Immigration Act of 1990 revamped the US immigration system by creating Temporary Protected Status, which could be granted to asylum-seekers to allow them to live and work within

the US while their asylum applications were pending approval. In addition, it gave priority to asylum-seekers from countries with especially high levels of political violence, such as El Salvador. I used this source to understand what the Sanctuary Movement accomplished and the gains they made in US law.

“S.643 - 96th Congress (1979-1980): Refugee Act of 1979.” *Congress.gov*, 2020, www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/senate-bill/643.

The Refugee Act of 1979 (most commonly called the Refugee Act of 1980) defines what constitutes a refugee in order to clearly label who qualifies for asylum. It created rigid qualifications for asylum, which led to problems with implementation. I used this source to understand what this bill was trying to do and how it was used to exclude many people from attaining refugee status.

“Salvadoran Refugees Challenge U.S. Stand.” *The New York Times*, 13, April 1982, A3, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/04/13/us/salvadoran-refugees-challenge-us-stand.html>

This source discusses how immigrant rights lawyers pushed back against illegal deportations. I used it to show the practices that motivated the rise of the Sanctuary Movement. Lawyers made clear that the Reagan administration was violating the Refugee Act of 1980.

Thornton, Mary. “Refusing Asylum to Salvadorans May Violate Pact, U.N. Probe Finds,” *Washington Post*, 31, January 1982, A17.

I used this source to show how newspapers in the 1980s were reporting on the Reagan administration’s failure to follow international law. The United Nations stated that the US

government was in violation of international law for systematically rejecting Salvadoran asylum applications without regard for individual circumstances.

Waco, Alice. Personal Interview. February 9, 2025.

I interviewed Alice Waco over Zoom in February 2025. She told me about her work as a political activist for the Sanctuary Movement. Alice provided answers to my questions about the purpose of the Sanctuary Movement and the range of activism in which members engaged.

Secondary Sources

Altemus, Michele. "The Sanctuary Movement." *Whittier Law Review*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1988, pp. 683-722.

This article explores the legal aspects of the Sanctuary Movement, such as the international agreements that the US was refusing to follow. I used this source to describe the movement in my introduction, as well as provide additional information about the legal motivations of the movement.

Blitzer, Jonathan. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*. Penguin, 2024.

Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here discusses the Sanctuary Movement from its founding to the modern day, as well as the violence that unfolded in Central America during the 1970s-80s. It provided me with a clear picture of what ordinary people were experiencing during the military dictatorships of El Salvador and discussed the aims and accomplishments of the Sanctuary Movement. This book was my inspiration for this paper.

Bourgeois, Roy. "My Journey from Silence to Solidarity – Church Authority."

Churchauthority.org, 2023, www.churchauthority.org/my-journey-from-silence-to-solidarity-bourgeois/.

This source helped me understand the religious beliefs behind the Sanctuary Movement. The movement was inspired by liberation theology and the belief that people of God must work for the poor and the oppressed. It did not make it into the paper, but it helped me understand how movement members connected their religious convictions to their activism.

Ching, Erik Kristofer. *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador a Battle over Memory*. Chapel Hill North Carolina, University Of North Carolina Press, 2016.

This book discusses the death squads in El Salvador, describing how they would burn and pillage the countryside, raping and murdering people as they went. It also discusses how the death squads were supported and trained by the US military. I used this source to detail the high levels of violence in El Salvador during the civil war and how the US supported this violence.

Chomsky, Aviva. *Central America's Forgotten History*. Beacon Press, 2021.

Aviva Chomsky explores the political turmoil in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, going as far back as several centuries. She details the violence that occurred in each of these countries during the early twentieth century, the revolutions during the 1970s-90s, the modern political climate in these areas, and the impact the US had on the region. This source helped me understand the conflicts occurring in the region and the historical significance of the Sanctuary Movement.

Cottle, Jennie. “How ‘Sanctuary Cities’ in the US Stand up to Federal Immigration Enforcement.” *Policy Shift*, 2018, <https://www.policy-shift.com/single-post/2018/07/26/Sanctuary-Cities-How-local-policies-stand-up-to-immigration-enforcement>.

This source discusses the creation and purpose of sanctuary cities. I used it to explain some of the additional strategies of the Sanctuary Movement to undermine INS deportation efforts in the US. In addition, the creation of sanctuary cities is one of the lasting impacts of the movement.

Crittenden, Ann. *Sanctuary: A story of American Conscience and the Law in Collision*. New York: Grove, 1988.

This book explains how the US government was violating the Refugee Act of 1980 and how the Sanctuary Movement arose to combat these violations. I used it to connect the moral and theological justifications for the movement to US government policy.

“El Salvador - International Commission on Missing Persons.” *International Commission on Missing Persons*, 28 May 2024, icmp.int/the-missing/where-are-the-missing/el-salvador/.

This article details what may have happened to the nine thousand Salvadorans that went missing during the civil war. Many were unofficially adopted by American, European, or other Salvadoran families, while many were killed and their bodies never found. I used this source to provide statistics that detailed the impact of the death squads on Salvadoran citizens.

Gill, Lesley. *The School of the Americas*. Duke University Press Books, 2004.

The School of the Americas discusses the School of the Americas and how it trained soldiers from elite units in Central America to suppress counterinsurgency efforts in their

countries. These elite units would burn villages to the ground, murdering and raping the inhabitants in the process. This source further revealed US involvement in El Salvador and allowed me to highlight why sanctuary activists were opposed to US foreign policy in the region.

Levine, Daniel H. "Assessing the Impacts of Liberation Theology in Latin America." *The Review of Politics*, vol. 50, no. 2, 1988, pp. 241–263.

This source explains the religious doctrine undergirding the Sanctuary Movement. I used it to demonstrate how the movement was able to quickly motivate religious congregations to join it because movement rationales aligned with people's religious convictions.

Macekura, Stephen. "'For Fear of Persecution': Displaced Salvadorans and U.S. Refugee Policy in the 1980s." *Journal of Policy History* vol. 23, no. 3, 2011, pp. 357–380.

This article details the transition from the human rights-focused Carter administration to the Cold War-focused Reagan administration. The Cold War influenced how Reagan interpreted immigration law and he refused to define Salvadoran refugees as anything other than economic migrants. I used this source to explain policy shifts and implementation, shortcomings in the Refugee Act, and movement motivations.

Moakley, John. "Support Moakley-Deconcini Bill to Protect Central American Refugees." *Omeka.net*, 2025, moakleyarchive.omeka.net/files/show/2907.

This source discusses the bills that were brought to Congress to address the refugee crisis. I used it to explain the legislative goals and achievements of the movement.

Nelson-Pallmeyer, Jack. *School of Assassins*. Films Media Group. 1994.

School of Assassins is a documentary that discusses the School of the Americas and how it trained the soldiers in the death squads in El Salvador. This documentary provided me with some deeper information about the death squads, why the US sponsored them, and what the death squads did in El Salvador. It also gave me information about how people protested US support for Central American military dictatorships and advocated for change from Congress.

Perla, Hector, and Susan Bibler Coutin. "Legacies and Origins of the 1980s US–Central American Sanctuary Movement." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2009, pp. 7–19.

This article analyzes the Sanctuary Movement in retrospective, re-examining the movement after the passage of time. It discusses the victories and defeats within the movement and the future implications of the movement. I used this source to discuss the origins and results of the movement, including how it impacted modern immigration law.

Smith, Christian. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. University of Chicago Press. 1996.

Resisting Reagan details the different subgroups of the Central American Peace Movement and how, when Ronald Reagan came into power, they all worked to resist his policies. The Central American Peace Movement engaged in an immense amount of work throughout Reagan's administration, including visiting El Salvador and Nicaragua to directly protect the citizens of those countries from being murdered by their own governments. This source helped me describe

the kinds of activism in which Sanctuary Movement members engaged, their motivations, and how they expanded the movement.

Uhlmann, Natascha Elena. "The Sanctuary Movement Put U.S. Foreign Policy on Trial." *In These Times*, 6 June 2024, inthesetimes.com/article/the-sanctuary-movement-put-u-s-foreign-policy-on-trial.

This article details how Sanctuary Movement members were put on trial for smuggling immigrants across the border. During this trial, the judge ruled that the sanctuary activists were not allowed to cite foreign policy to defend themselves, which led them to use the media to spread their message. This source helped me explain civil disobedience and civil initiative and why the Sanctuary Movement believed they had a moral obligation to aid Salvadorans.