

Richard Sobel, ed. *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Controversy over Contra Aid*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1993. Pp. x, 315. Cloth, \$52.50; paper, \$19.95.

This unhappy little book illustrates the difference between typing and publishing. *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy* grew out of a conference at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs in May 1990. The Princeton meeting combined traditional scholarly papers with observations from Reagan administration officials and members of Congress who played prominent roles in the debate over aiding the Nicaraguan contras in the 1980s.

Editor Richard Sobel, from Princeton's Center of International Studies, has assembled the results of the proceedings in an ungainly book that focuses on Congress's 1985 and 1986 votes to provide money to the contras. There are seven separate scholarly papers. In addition, Sobel includes two chapters of "commentaries" from former Reagan officials, among them ex-Assistant Secretary of State Elliot Abrams. Another chapter consists of remarks by U.S. Representatives Ike Skelton, Mickey Edwards, and Bill Richardson. Two other "chapters" are simply long charts: one a chronology of the contra-aid debate and the other a summary of relevant poll results. Sobel and his academic colleagues are attempting, in brief, to refute Gabriel Almond's old argument that, in matters of foreign policy, the public is too apathetic, ignorant, and fickle to exercise much real influence.

The narrow focus of the conference makes the papers as a whole unduly repetitive, but there are some fine individual efforts. Emory political scientist Robert Pastor provides a balanced survey of the long struggle between Congress and the White House. Other scholars examine administration efforts to muster popular support for contra aid through "public diplomacy." A few interesting conclusions emerge. On the key congressional votes, ideology was more important than party loyalty. Conservatives saw contra aid as the right-wing equivalent of the Panama Canal treaties: a battle that was winnable despite a lack of popular support. Contrary to Almond's thesis, however, public opposition to aid proved remarkably stubborn, but, as Almond would have predicted, most U.S. citizens knew—or cared—very little about the issue. Many members of Congress worried less about existing hostility to contra aid than about the possibility they might later be blamed for "losing Nicaragua," which may say less about the importance of public opinion than about the nation's enduring anti-communism.

Sobel's book will not appeal to students, although instructors might use it for lecture notes. The prose ranges from the deadly dull to the simply impenetrable. One writer tells us "Because individuals' opinions regarding specific foreign policy issues are lodged within logically antecedent belief systems that enable individuals to order perceptions into meaningful guides to behavior, beliefs about foreign policy should be related systematically to preferences regarding particular policies." In the best traditions of political pseudo-science, clichés that would seem banal as cocktail party chit-chat are advanced as learned conclusions. One author suggests "presidential influence in Congress is stronger when the president's standing in the polls is high," and then provides five citations to prove the point. Sobel offers no sustained discussion of the Iran-contra scandal, which is comparable to assessing the Nixon presidency without mentioning Watergate. More substantively, the significance of public opinion in the contra debate remains elusive. The politicians and policy-makers occasionally seem mystified by the scholars' preoccupation with it. As Mickey Edwards said, on this issue, "there was really no public opinion." The experts argue that public sentiment constrained Reagan, but we do not know how much because Sobel's book does not clearly reveal just how far Reagan wanted to go. And the polls notwithstanding, Congress continued U.S. aid. Oddly enough, Everett Ladd, in a brief forward, opines that "during the controversy over contra aid, the public spoke, and the government listened." Stranger yet, in a cover blurb, Jon Krosnick calls Sobel's volume "beautifully written throughout." One wonders if they neglected to read it. Who could blame them?