

In the Shadow of the Giant

Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- analyze the origins of political instability in Nicaragua in the 19th and early 20th centuries.
 - evaluate the impact of American intervention in Nicaragua.
 - evaluate the importance of Augusto César Sandino in Nicaraguan history and mythology.
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Materials

- Student Handout: **Nicaragua and the United States**
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Activities

1. Distribute the student handout entitled **Nicaragua and the United States**.
 - a. Direct students to read the first section entitled *The Walker Affair*.
 - b. Ask students to evaluate the condition of Nicaragua as described in the first paragraph. Does it appear to be politically stable or unstable? Why?
 - c. Ask students to evaluate Walker's role in Nicaragua. Why do Nicaraguans still celebrate their victory over Walker? What does he symbolize?
 2. Write the phrase "Monroe Doctrine" on the chalkboard.
 - a. Ask students to recall what they know of the Monroe Doctrine.
 - b. Explain that the Monroe Doctrine is a cornerstone of American foreign policy. Issued in 1823, it declared that the United States would protect the Western Hemisphere from any intervention by the European Powers.
 - c. Write the following statement by Secretary of State Richard Olney (1895) on the chalkboard or display it on an overhead transparency: "To-day the United States is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition."
 - d. Ask the class to interpret the implication of Olney's statement. What is he claiming? What is the meaning of the phrase "its fiat is law?"
 3. Direct students to read the first three paragraphs in the section entitled *The Roosevelt Corollary*.
 - a. Direct the attention of students to President Roosevelt's quote. What does the phrase "international police power" imply?
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- b. Ask students to explain how the Roosevelt Corollary was implemented in Nicaragua to remove José Santos Zelaya from power. What does his removal imply about American intentions in Nicaragua?
 4. Direct students to read the section entitled *Dollar Diplomacy*.
 - a. Ask students to summarize the basic principles of dollar diplomacy.
 - b. Write the word “sovereignty” on the chalkboard and explain that in order to be truly independent a nation-state must have exclusive control (sovereignty) over its own territory.
 - c. Ask students to assess the relationship between Nicaragua and the United States during the time period of dollar diplomacy. Did Nicaragua really possess sovereignty over its territory? Why or why not?
 - d. Ask students to hypothesize why, as stated by the U. S. envoy, “the natural sentiment of the overwhelming majority of Nicaraguans is antagonistic to the United States.”
 5. Direct students to read the section entitled *Augusto César Sandino*.
 - a. Direct students to focus on President Coolidge’s remark in the first paragraph.
 - What does it imply about the relationship between Nicaragua and the United States?
 - How did the Nicaraguan view differ?
 - How do you account for this difference?
 - b. Ask students to explain why Sandino is considered Nicaragua’s national hero. What did he achieve? What do his effort symbolize?
 6. Concluding Activity
Direct students to write a short essay in response to the following question:
“Webster’s Dictionary defines imperialism as ‘the policy of extending the rule or authority of an empire or nation over foreign countries.’ Based on that definition, can U.S. policy toward Nicaragua before 1933 be classified as imperialistic in nature? Why or why not?”
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Nicaragua and the United States

The Walker Affair



***La Battalla de
San Jacinto*** by
**Amilcar
Mendieta**



**Granada “1855
– 1857”** by **Luis
Abarado**

Nicaragua won its independence in stages: first as a part of the Mexican empire of Agustín de Iturbide in 1822, then as a member of the Central American Federation in 1823, and finally as an individual sovereign state in 1838. Throughout this period, the Leonese, who eventually came to call themselves Liberals, and the Granadinos, who championed the Conservative cause, squabbled and fought with each other over the control of their country. After 1838, the chaos and interregional warfare intensified. Presidents came and went as one group or the other imposed temporary control.

In 1854, the Liberals, who were at the time losing in a struggle to unseat the Conservatives, turned for help to a San Francisco-based soldier of fortune named William Walker. Walker sailed in June 1855 from California to Nicaragua with a small band of armed Californians. After some initial military setbacks he and his Liberal allies took Granada in October and set up a coalition government under a Conservative, Patricio Rivas. Almost from the start, the real power in the government was Walker himself, who rapidly began to implement a series of ideas that included the encouragement of foreign investment and the increased exploitation of Nicaraguan resources. In July 1856, Walker formally took over the presidency. He planned to use the city of Granada as a base to build a Central American empire.

Many Nicaraguans of both parties became increasingly alarmed at the foreign takeover of their country. This was especially true in 1856 when Walker, the dictator-president, legalized slavery and declared English to be the official language. As a result, it was not long before the onset of a war in which Nicaraguans of both parties and, at one time or another, troops from all of the Central American republics fought against the hated foreigners. Walker's forces were finally forced to flee from Granada. Before doing so, his men set fire to the city, and one of them left behind a sign reading “Here was Granada.” Most of the city was destroyed.

In the spring of 1857, the U.S. government intervened to arrange a truce and to allow Walker to surrender and leave Nicaragua. (Walker returned to Central America in yet another filibustering attempt in 1860, but he was captured by the British and turned over to the Hondurans, who quickly tried him and put him before a firing squad.) So important is the war against Walker in Nicaraguan patriotic lore that the independence day that *nicas* celebrate on September 14 is a commemoration of a decisive battle at San Jacinto against Walker and his troops.

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**The Roosevelt
Corollary**

U.S. expansion to the Pacific coast of North America and the discovery of gold in California stimulated intense U.S. interest in Nicaragua as the site for an interoceanic transit route. However, Great Britain also had developed an interest in doing the same. In 1850 the two countries attempted to diffuse the potential for conflict by signing the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty stipulating that any isthmian canal would be a joint venture. Following the Spanish-American War, the United States set out to modify the treaty. The end result was the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty that essentially gave the United States a green light to construct a canal.

In 1901, the Isthmian Canal Commission reported in favor of Nicaragua over Panama, and in 1902 Congress passed the Hepburn Bill authorizing a canal through Nicaragua. Thanks to a strong lobbying campaign by Phillipe Buneau-Varilla representing the interests of the New Panama Canal Company, the Commission reversed itself and decided for the technologically preferable Panama passage. Congress finally chose the Panama route, with the encouragement of President Theodore Roosevelt.

In his 1904 annual message to Congress, President Roosevelt stated:

“Chronic wrongdoing . . . may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States . . . to the exercise of an international police power.”

This interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine became known as the Roosevelt Corollary. It also increased American interest in those nations near the Panama Canal because the canal put them “in the front yard of the United States” according to Secretary of War Elihu Root.

When Nicaraguan President José Santos Zelaya solicited funds to build a second interoceanic canal, especially from Germany (whose capital investments stood three times greater in Nicaragua than that of the U.S.), Washington turned against a leader that some Nicaraguans compared to Roosevelt himself. When Zelaya’s government executed two American mercenaries for aiding anti-government rebels, Washington broke diplomatic relations, threatened naval intervention, and forced Zelaya into exile. The U.S. then negotiated a treaty with the new conservative government of Adolfo Díaz.

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**Dollar
Diplomacy**

Another American policy that affected Nicaragua was the principle of “dollar diplomacy.” Its supporters believed that American businesses should invest in the Latin American republics in order to head off European financiers. If mismanagement or political disturbances endangered American investments, then the United States would intervene.

In 1912, the new Nicaraguan government faced financial disorder and revolution. In September 1912, the U.S. ordered 354 marines into battle on behalf of the Díaz regime and to protect American lives and property. After tipping the scales against rebel forces, the marines returned home, leaving a force of 100 to guard the American legation. (When rebellions ensued in 1925, the marines returned to quell the disturbances.) Nicaraguan finances were placed under American control. One U.S. envoy reported, however, that “the natural sentiment of the overwhelming majority of Nicaraguans is antagonistic to the United States.”

In 1916, the U.S. and Nicaragua agreed to the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty. In exchange for \$3 million, the U.S. acquired the right to build a canal across Nicaraguan territory, lease the Great and Little Corn Islands, and establish a naval base in the Gulf of Fonseca. It also excluded European Powers from the Gulf of Fonseca. During the 1916 Nicaraguan presidential election, American President Woodrow Wilson ordered U.S. warships to cruise offshore to demonstrate this point.

**Augusto César
Sandino**

Nicaragua was subjected to direct foreign military intervention from U.S. troops from 1912 to 1925 and again from 1926 to 1933. When President Coolidge ordered the marines to return the second time, he stated that “We are not making war on Nicaragua any more than a policeman is on the street is making war on passersby.” Nicaraguans saw it differently. “The Machos are coming,” they said of the marines. “They will burn our houses.”

During the first occupation, from 1912 to 1925, the United States ran Nicaraguan affairs through a series of Conservative presidents. During the second occupation Washington arranged a truce (the “Peace of Tipitapa”) between the Liberals and the Conservatives that, among other things, provided for a free U.S.-supervised election in 1928. Although Jose Maria Moncada, the Liberal Party candidate, won the election, the United States still remained essentially in control of Nicaraguan affairs.

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Augusto César Sandino

One revolutionary leader refused to surrender the struggle against the puppet governments created by the United States. Calling Moncada a traitor and denouncing United States intervention, rebel leader Augusto César Sandino reorganized his forces as the Army for the Defense of Nicaraguan Sovereignty (Ejército Defensor de la Soberanía de Nicaragua-EDSN). From 1927 to 1933, he led a tenacious guerrilla war against government forces and the American forces of occupation, which numbered 50,000 by 1929. Sandino protested the “corrupting vice of the dollar in Nicaragua” and blasted the Monroe Doctrine as meaning “America for the Yankees.” His struggle took on the character of a war of national liberation.

The upshot of Sandino's activities was that the marines and government troops eventually found themselves bogged down in a costly Vietnam-type war that they simply could not win militarily. Practices such as the aerial bombardment of "hostile" towns and hamlets and the forced resettlement of peasant populations only intensified popular identification with the guerrilla cause. After debating whether to continue direct fighting against Sandino's forces, the United States opted to develop and train the nonpartisan Nicaraguan National Guard to contain internal violence. As the marines were withdrawn in 1933, command of this new "national" army passed from the Americans to an ambitious Nicaraguan politician, Anastasio Somoza Garcia.

Because his major condition for peace had been the departure of the marines, Sandino signed a preliminary peace agreement, in February 1933, with the Sacasa government. Calling for a cessation of hostilities and a partial disarmament of the guerrillas, the document also guaranteed amnesty for Sandino's men and a degree of autonomy for those Sandinists who wished to settle in the territory along the Rio Coco. In 1934 there were further peace negotiations. In the long run, however, Sandino was deceived, captured, and executed under the orders of Anastasio Somoza Garcia. But his daring stand against the foreign occupier had made him into Nicaragua's national hero.

Sources

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