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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

U. S. MARINE CORPS OPERATIONS IN NICARAGUA FROM 1927 TO 1933

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

MAJOR TAYLOR WHITE

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Executive Summary

Title: U.S. Marine Corps operations in Nicaragua from 1927 to 1933.

Author: Major Taylor White, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: U. S. Marines conducted successful counterinsurgency operations, established a non-partisan *Guardia Nacional*, and ensured free and fair elections in 1928 and 1932, but the withdrawal of American support commensurate with the withdrawal of the Marines allowed for the subversion of democracy in Nicaragua.

Discussion: United States Marines were ordered ashore in Nicaragua in 1927 to stop the ongoing civil war and protect American lives and economic interests. Presidential Envoy, Henry Stimson soon followed and made an agreement with the ruling Conservative party and the warring Liberal militias to stop the war and hold free and fair elections the following year. The Marines disarmed both parties and established a non-partisan national guard to support elections and counter the remaining armed Liberal General, Augusto Sandino.

The Marines successfully accomplished all their missions, creating the most professional and proficient military in the history of Nicaragua while simultaneously conducting counterinsurgency operations against Sandino. The results of these successes were two free and fair national elections in 1928 and 1932.

Shortly after the departure of the Marines in 1933, Nicaragua's *Guardia Nacional* became a partisan organization that was used to further the political ambitions of its director, General Somoza. In 1936, General Somoza used his power to take the presidency while maintaining power of the *Guardia Nacional*.

Conclusion: The new national government of Nicaragua failed to capitalize on the accomplishments of the Marines. From operations against Sandino to the creation of the *Guardia Nacional*, the Marines provided Nicaragua a window of opportunity to implement a true democracy. When the United States withdrew in 1933 claiming success based on the two free and fair elections, the *Guardia Nacional* became an instrument of political power and General Somoza used it to circumvent the constitution and pervert democracy in Nicaragua.

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Preface

I became interested in the Nicaragua campaign while studying the Marine Corps' transformative inter-war years while in college. My initial research into this era of operations was investigating the integration of Marine aviation into operations against General Sandino from 1927-1928. During this research, I first encountered the Marines involvement in transforming Nicaraguan society and the multiple missions assigned to this small Brigade of Marines. I was fascinated to read reports from majors and captains corresponding directly with General Lejeune about their operations covering all aspects of Nicaraguan culture.

During this reading, I began to question why democracy had failed in Nicaragua after so much dedication and determination by these Marines. The reports about their success against Sandino, the professionalism of the *Guardia Nacional*, and the success of the elections in 1928 and 1932 led me to believe the Marines were successful at the tactical and operational level. I initially approached this topic by investigating the measure of effectiveness assigned to the occupation, the free and fair elections of 1928 and 1932, but these too were a success. I found an informative work on the occupation that I had not used in previous research. Michel Gobat's *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua Under U.S. Imperial Rule* discusses the failure of the occupation despite the successful elections. I quote Gobat's thesis from his chapter on this period during my conclusion, because I found myself being drawn to his position. Perhaps the United States had caused Nicaragua to fail just by imposing its brand of democracy, and that a democracy is destined to fail in such a place. The Nicaraguan government's inability to select non-partisan leadership for the *Guardia Nacional* ultimately led to the organization's misuse. There was also shortsightedness in the American policy, with too much emphasis placed on the elections. If given proper time, the situation created by the Marines could have transformed Nicaraguan society.

This period in America's history is certainly worthy of study. As the United States was beginning to grow as a world power, she put increased demands on her armed forces. The Marines answered that demand in Nicaragua from 1927 to 1933 and proved their flexibility as they succeeded across the spectrum of operations.

INTRODUCTION

After coming ashore in Nicaragua in 1927, United States Marines secured the peace between the Liberal and Conservative parties by disarming both the regular army and the Liberal militias. The United States would recognize only a constitutionally elected government in Nicaragua, and the Marines remained in Nicaragua to ensure free and fair elections in 1928. One Liberal general, Augusto Sandino, refused to disarm and compromise with the other parties, putting the elections of 1928 in jeopardy. The Marines began offensive operations against Sandino in 1927. As Sandino's power grew, additional Marines deployed to Nicaragua and began operations deep in enemy held territory. The Marines also trained a national constabulary force capable of providing security throughout the country once the Marines departed. U. S. Marines conducted successful counterinsurgency operations, established a non-partisan *Guardia Nacional*, and ensured free and fair elections in 1928 and 1932, but the withdrawal of American support commensurate with the withdrawal of the Marines allowed for the subversion of democracy in Nicaragua.

BACKGROUND

Years of strife in Nicaragua between the Liberal and Conservative Parties over power sharing prompted the United States to intervene numerous times beginning in 1853. The United States based its Nicaragua policy on the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, justifying the use of force to make the Western Hemisphere safe for American economic interests. The United States used Marines to provide long-term stability from 1912-1925, allowing the economy to grow and the central government to regain control. The Marines departed in 1925 after elections, but only one year later, fighting between liberal and conservative forces

compelled the United States to land troops again to protect American property and citizens from violence.¹

Conservative supporters of the former President and commander of the Army, Emiliano Chamorro, overthrew the liberal presidency in 1926 and the elected leadership departed the country. The army however, had leadership from the Liberal party and fighting ensued between the army and the Conservative forces. The United States intervened and ordered the Marines to establish neutral zones between the warring armies. The United States forced the two sides to agree on an interim President until the next election in 1928. Both parties agreed on Adolf Diaz as interim President, but Juan B. Sacasa, the exiled vice president, and General Jose Maria Moncada, the liberal army commander, continued to revolt against the government. In November 1926, President Diaz requested additional United States support.²

In January 1927, the United States signaled its support for the Diaz government and began shipping supplies and troops to Nicaragua. By March 1927, 2000 Marines from the Fifth Regiment and Observation Squadron One were ashore and began enforcing neutral zones around cities and business operations. Brigadier General Logan Feland also arrived in March to command all Marine forces in Nicaragua, now called the Second Brigade. The Marines did not have enough forces to campaign against the liberals, but their presence forced further negotiations between the Diaz government and the liberal armies.³

President Calvin Coolidge sent former Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, to Nicaragua to negotiate a settlement between the Liberals and Conservatives. Stimson met with both parties along the Tipitapa River in May 1927 and they agreed on a peace settlement. Adolf Diaz would remain in power, the Conservatives would reinstate the disposed Liberal leaders in Congress, and free elections would be held again in 1928. President Diaz as the incumbent, however, would be ineligible for reelection. Stimson viewed the supervised elections to be the pivotal piece:

If a generally admitted fair election could be held, it might serve as a guide and pattern toward which the minds of the Nicaraguan people might turn in the future, and that having been shown by Americans that such an election was possible, they would be encouraged in the future to adopt permanently a system of free elections with their own efforts, The saving of the nation from anarchy...the setting of that nation upon the road to a possible orderly self-government- all seemed to me to be a goal worthy of every possible effort.⁴

Both parties and the Nicaragua regular army would disarm, and the Marines would form, lead, and train a new national guard. The Eleventh Regiment and Observation Squadron Four arrived in Nicaragua in May 1927 to help enforce the Tipitapa Agreement by tightening the occupation and disarming the two parties.⁵

Stimson's arrangements for the use of the American military were unlike any in its history in Latin America. United States Marines had landed before to protect American property and interests, but had departed once a situation was under control of the native government. Marines had also occupied Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, but during these occupations, there was an American military government and the Marines were involved in all aspects of governing these countries. In Nicaragua, Marines would be serving in the Nicaraguan *Guardia Nacional*, directly commanded by the President of Nicaragua; there would be a brigade of Marines directly responsible to the Secretary of the Navy, and finally an American minister, with no authority over any of the American forces, who was the direct representative of the American president. Stimson's arrangements represented a change in American policy towards Nicaragua and were intended to provide Nicaragua an opportunity to form a true democracy.⁶

Despite the concessions in the Tipitapa agreement, one liberal leader, General Augusto Sandino, refused to compromise and acknowledge Diaz as president. General Sandino despised American imperialism and vowed to continue fighting. With his small band of 50 rebels, Sandino withdrew to the mountains along the Honduras border. General Feland and the Marines

viewed Sandino as merely a bandit, and they focused on disarming the two warring parties and developing the new National Guard. Two months after the Tipitapa agreement, the Eleventh Regiment departed, reducing the Second Brigade to 1,500 Marines.⁷

GENERAL AUGUSTO SANDINO

Augusto Sandino was a native of the Nicaraguan lowlands, born in 1895, he grew up a member of the Liberal party. He had witnessed Conservative governments give away the country's natural resources to the United States, while the workers lacked any representation in the government. Sandino also witnessed United States Marines assert their power across his country in numerous civil wars, always supporting the American owned mines and the Conservative party Government. In 1920, Sandino moved to Mexico where he worked in the American owned oil fields. Despite high wages, he was exposed to radical social doctrine by many of the workers. While in Mexico, Sandino adopted a passionate Latin American nationalism rather than radical socialism.⁸

Augusto Sandino returned to Nicaragua in June 1926 at the request of his father. The liberal rebellion against the government was beginning and Sandino felt an urgency to get to his homeland. Upon return, he worked at an American owned gold mine, where he spread his thoughts about American exploitation. By October 1926, Sandino had raised an armed band of 29 men and began attacking government garrisons in the North.⁹

Following these attacks, Sandino appealed to the ousted Vice President, Dr. Juan Sacasa, and liberal leader of the Army, General Moncada to help equip his band of rebels for future attacks. The two leaders of the Liberal party received Sandino with disdain and ordered him to join his men to one of the legitimate army units. Instead of handing over his men, Sandino equipped his rebels with supplies Moncada's troops abandoned ahead of the Marines' landing.

This resourcefulness gained him credibility with the Liberal party, which made him a General, and he served with General Moncada throughout the remainder of the civil war.¹⁰

By May 1927, Sandino's power had grown and his approval was necessary for the Tipitapa Agreement to be successful. Despite Moncada offering him a governorship, Sandino would not agree to American troops remaining in Nicaragua. Sandino requested more time to deliberate on the proposal, but he was just buying time in order to relocate his forces. He did not intend to disarm his men while American forces were still in Nicaragua. He felt General Moncada was a traitor for agreeing to this settlement and set out to "protest the betrayal of the Fatherland."¹¹

OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS

General Sandino began to gather popular support in the northern regions of the country, and as the only armed resistance still at large, the Marines moved to towns in the north to disarm him. Sandino's men attacked an isolated Marine garrison in Ocotal, and harassed patrols in the northern areas. Frustrated by the continuing attacks, General Feland wrote to General Lejeune, "I am not planning a campaign, in the usual sense of the word, but I am trying to force him out of the country by successively occupying the towns which he claims."¹² A combined air and ground attack was planned for Sandino's hideout, known as El Chipote, in December 1927 and January 1928. The expedition was a failure, and Sandino's forces escaped and decided to wage a war of maneuver against the Marines.¹³

The escape of Sandino and the upcoming elections caused General Feland to request reinforcements in January 1928. The Eleventh Regiment returned to Nicaragua in May 1928, bringing the Second Brigade up to 2,500 Marines. General Feland then divided the country into three operational areas: the southern and eastern areas, controlled by the Fifth Regiment, and the

northern area, controlled by the Eleventh Regiment. As the Brigade consolidated its control over the country, its mission remained unchanged: supervise the elections and assist Nicaragua with the establishment of a constabulary force. Attacking Sandino would prevent his influence in the upcoming elections and it would allow the new National Guard to be more effective without any organized resistance.¹⁴

The Eleventh Regiment established its headquarters in Ocotal and immediately began active patrolling. The pressure from the attack on El Chipote and the presence of the Eleventh Regiment pushed Sandino from the northern mountains to the eastern coast to attack American economic interests. Sandino's hatred for the occupation of his country led him to attack American owned mines and lumber facilities, but his attacks only strengthened the United States' resolve in the crisis. These attacks brought Marines and aircraft from the Eastern area to the coast in April 1928, forcing Sandino to shorten his supply lines and withdraw to the Honduran border.¹⁵

Sandino remained in the northeastern part of the country while planning to disrupt the elections in November 1928. The northeastern border of Nicaragua and Honduras is dense jungle accessible only by foot or the Coco River. This terrain helped conceal the rebels' movements, even from aerial observation. Sandino and his men did not use horses and traveled at night to prevent the Marines from locating their positions. Sandino also understood his value to the resistance; he never stayed in one place more than five nights, never traveled with more than 50 men, and usually slept downhill from his men's camps to maintain an advantage on any ambush.¹⁶

The Marines struggled with locating the elusive Sandino. The part time rebels who assisted Sandino confused the Marines. These part time rebels were often good citizens, but they stood ready to supply Sandino's men or join him for a campaign if required. There were still not

enough Marines to guard all the towns and conduct offensive operations, so the Marines decided to put a squeeze on Sandino. By maintaining pressure in the northern area and pushing patrols from the eastern area up the Coco River, they planned to dislodge him or make him irrelevant. By the summer of 1928, the Eleventh Regiment drove 1,600 Sandinistas to seek amnesty, but the Fifth Regiment operated in some of the most remote areas of Nicaragua, and it took time to reach Sandino.¹⁷

The Marines of the Fifth Regiment believed the Coco River could be an avenue of approach to Sandino. The Coco River is the largest in Nicaragua, running over 400 miles along the northern border of the country. Marines conducted reconnaissance of the river in the spring of 1928, and patrols commenced in June 1928. The eastern area commander ordered the patrols to proceed up the Coco River, drive the bandits from the river valley, and hold the villages along the route. The Coco patrol was to finally link up with patrols from the Eleventh Regiment in the northern area and cut off Sandino from the population. The 91-man patrol underwent many hardships caused by the terrain and the enemy, but by August 1928, the Marines had conquered the Coco River valley. Controlling the rivers restricted the rebels' freedom of movement, and took away Sandino's advantage over the Marines.

When the Second Brigade arrived in Nicaragua, it brought six scout-bomber aircraft, but as the support requirements grew, so did the number of aircraft. The Marine Corps sent scout-bombers, amphibians, and transports to Nicaragua to support brigade operations; when the Marines departed in 1933 the squadron had grown to 26 aircraft. The Marines relied on the squadron to provide combat support, communications, and reconnaissance. This support allowed the Marines to operate for extended periods away from their garrison, while maintaining contact with friendly forces.¹⁸

During the Fifth Regiment's initial push north to disarm Sandino, Marine aviation provided air support, helping the Marines on the ground repel enemy attacks. Aircraft also received messages from ground forces via air panels, and they were able to report to regiment that ambushes had taken place. During Sandino's daring assault against the Marines, they were able to evacuate their casualties via air, demonstrating the versatility of this new platform. Prior to the Marines' assault on El Chipote, Marine aviation was integral in the planning. Aircrews would soften the hideout from the air, allowing ground forces to close with the objective.¹⁹

As valuable as close air support had been, the Marines began to use aviation as a one-two punch while patrolling in the north. Scout planes would report locations of rebel patrols, extending the eyes and ears of the ground commander. Pilots developed techniques to prevent enemy troops from hearing their engines as they flew close enough to the ground to identify potential targets. They would then write notes to the ground commander and drop messages about potential targets or guidance from headquarters. As the Marines pushed into the jungles, they relied heavily on aviation to locate the enemy.²⁰

The Coco River patrol demonstrated the greatest advantage afforded the Marines by aviation. The ability to supply troops via airdrop gave a small number of Marines the ability to follow Sandino into the most remote locations in Nicaragua. Throughout the Coco River patrol, food and ammunition kept being lost in the river, and only by aerial resupply were the Marines able to continue and complete their mission. Additionally, the aviators kept the patrols warned of activity around their position and on occasion ground forces would direct aircraft to attack enemy positions. The squadron also helped evacuate casualties that otherwise would have perished in the jungle.²¹

General Sandino was still not fully contained; he could maneuver in the jungles, but the Marines diminished his influence as the elections of 1928 approached. Sandino's men conducted

limited patrols prior to the election, warning against participation, but the Marines continually pushed them back into the jungles. The Marines successfully marginalized General Sandino in preparation for elections in 1928. The primary objective of the occupation was holding free and fair elections, and the Marines set the stage for their success.²²

Despite the free and fair elections placing the Liberal party in power in 1928, Sandino was still not satisfied. Liberal leaders made several offers of peace to Sandino in the months following the elections, to include positions of power in the new government. Sandino refused; his hatred of the Americans and those who had conspired with them was too great to compromise. As the Marines increased pressure on the rebels, Sandino left the country in the spring of 1929 to request additional support from neighboring countries. Even during his absence, Sandino's men never fully suspended operations, and the violence against the new government continued.²³

The Eleventh Regiment would depart Nicaragua by the summer of 1929, having succeeded in marginalizing Sandino and ensuring the elections of 1928 were both free and fair. The Fifth Regiment would remain to oversee National Guard operations due to fears that the government might use them for political motives. The United States was reluctant to allow the constabulary it had established to take sides on political issues. Despite the success of the 1928 elections and the professionalization of the National Guard, Marines remained in Nicaragua to oversee the 1932 elections, with the last elements of the Fifth Regiment departing on 2 January 1933.²⁴

GUARDIA NACIONAL de NICARAGUA

While the Second Brigade continued its offensive against General Sandino, selected Marines continued the development of the *Guardia Nacional*. The Marines established the

Guardia Nacional to serve as a non-partisan national force capable of maintaining order, ensuring fair elections, and implementing basic democratic principles.²⁵ President Diaz requested that an American Officer command the *Guardia*, and the Second Brigade provided a Marine Lieutenant Colonel to serve as *Jefe Director* of the *Guardia Nacional*. The director reported directly to the President of Nicaragua, with no intervening officials. Marine officers and non-commissioned officers would train and command the three-year volunteers who comprised the new *Guardia*. Initial strength of the *Guardia* was to be 600 enlisted men with a maximum of 60 American officers. By 1 July 1927, the *Guardia* had fielded one company with 50 enlisted men and 3 Marine Officers. The second and third companies were activated in August 1927.²⁶

The Marines established recruit qualification standards and recruit training courses. Recruits had to be 18 years of age, capable of passing a medical screening and able to read and write. The Marines soon dropped the reading and writing requirement based on the poor literacy rates in Nicaragua, later adding basic reading and writing classes to recruit training. Recruits went through one month of basic training and then reported directly to their units. The Marine leadership recommended follow-on schooling, but as operations against Sandino escalated for the *Guardia Nacional*, no time was available for advanced training. Despite these limitations, the United States Marines were able to field the best-trained and equipped force in Nicaraguan history.²⁷

The *Guardia Nacional*'s primary responsibilities were the policing of the country, the control of all armaments, and the training of native officers. The assumption of police responsibilities quickly spread the *Guardia* forces into the countryside. The United States firmly believed that a strong constabulary force would counter the power of local landowners. The feudal system across most of Nicaragua was a major obstacle to democracy. The *Guardia*

assumed police and judicial functions over much of the country and quickly became Nicaragua's strongest state institution.²⁸

Friction arose between the *Jefe Director* and the Marine Brigade Commander about how to employ the new *Guardia Nacional*. Both the Director and the Brigade Commander were Marine officers, but their positions caused them to have very different opinions. The Brigade Commander felt strongly that the fight against Sandino was a Nicaraguan problem and that the *Guardia* should focus on the counter-insurgency fight. The Director believed the *Guardia's* police responsibilities and training requirements were critical to the success of Nicaragua, and he thought the Sandinistas were a problem more suited for the Marines. The Director had his soldiers conducting humanitarian projects across the country, ensuring the new *Guardia* built trust with the Nicaraguans and helped build the credibility of the new government.²⁹ The *Guardia Nacional* involvement in the day-to-day lives of many Nicaraguans ensured it did not become divorced from the population. Involvement from the central government's constabulary force altered Nicaraguan society as the *Guardia* replaced the landowner as the local arbitrator for the population. This attack on the social system of Nicaragua was evident in the 1928 elections as the Liberal party won a sweeping victory, but powerful landowners now had grievances with the national government and its strong arm on local politics. This power shift pushed the conservative elites away from the United States model of democracy. The *Guardia Nacional* and the Marines prevented any backlash from the landowners against the general population. When the Marines departed, this local tension would test the professionalism of the *Guardia Nacional*.³⁰

Following successful Nicaraguan elections in 1928, the United States reduced its commitment of Marines fighting against Sandino. The departure of two-thirds of the Marines meant the *Guardia Nacional* would have to confront the rebels. The *Guardia* evolved into a

larger and costlier organization; in 1929, the force swelled to 2,300 soldiers and 300 officers, and the *Guardia* consumed 25 percent of Nicaragua's budget. By July 1929, the *Guardia Nacional* established 34 posts in the northern and central departments in order to counter Sandino. The *Guardia* conducted economy of force operations with the intent of keeping Sandino in the jungles and preventing him from expanding his control.

The United States Marines continued to lead the *Guardia Nacional* during operations against Sandino, these continuous operations had a significant impact on the Marines' ability to train and commission new officers for service with the *Guardia*. When the United States decided to pull all of the troops out of Nicaragua following the elections in 1932, the Marines had not created any field grade officers to assume the leadership positions in the *Guardia Nacional*. The solution to this lack of leadership came in the form of political appointments. The United States attempted to select an equal number of field grade officers from the two political parties. Despite the Marines' efforts, the appointment of *Jefe Director* was a political decision that caused the *Guardia Nacional* to become an instrument of political power. The outgoing and incoming presidents from the 1932 election attempted to agree on a suitable candidate, but the United States pressured the new president to select Anastasio Somoza Garcia, as the new Director. After years of establishing a non-partisan constabulary, the Marines departed just as the *Guardia Nacional* became a bi-partisan instrument of the state. The *Guardia* assassinated General Sandino some years later, even after the government granted him amnesty. The *Guardia Nacional* became a political instrument of the ruling party as it used force to bypass elections laws and intimidate members of the opposition.³¹

ELECTIONS

After ending the civil war of 1926-27, the United States thought it could infuse democracy into Nicaragua by holding free and fair elections.³² For these elections, President Coolidge appointed Brigadier General Frank R. McCoy, United States Army, to serve as the chairman of the National Board of Elections.³³ With experience in Cuba, Central America, and the Philippines, General McCoy was charged with drafting new election laws and supervising their execution in Nicaragua. The United States Electoral Mission brought 50 officers and an additional 550 enlisted members into Nicaragua about four months prior to the 1928 elections. American officers presided over the 13 departmental boards while enlisted men presided over the 492 polling stations.³⁴

In the lead up to the elections, the officers visited all the polling locations in their districts. They ensured that locations were easily accessible, and they often visited with locals to ensure they understood the procedures for registration and voting. The officers wanted to ensure they were countering the influence of the local land owning elite. Often they moved polling sites off large landowners' property to prevent the wealthy from influencing the public on voting day. The departmental board officers would also dismiss corrupt local officials. Just as the *Guardia Nacional* had filled the power vacuum left by the relegated landowners, the elector board members soon became arbitrators for the local populace.

On Election Day 1928, 133,000 Nicaraguans voted, 50,000 more votes than were cast in the last United States supervised election in 1924. For the first time in Nicaraguan history, the country's military and police remained neutral throughout the election and the liberal candidate, General Moncada, won the election. In January 1929, the country also conducted its first peaceful regime change when President Moncada was sworn into office.

Again, the United States supervised the national election in 1932, providing hundreds of military personnel to oversee districts and polling locations. The focus of the election committee members was to ensure a free and fair election without the influence of local landowners or the political elites. Since the Nicaraguan constitution prohibited President Moncada from running for reelection, the Liberal party selected the former Vice President, Dr. Juan Sacasa as their candidate. Despite over three years out of power, the Conservative party was still associated with causing the six-year occupation and could not win popular support. The people elected Dr. Sacasa and the Liberal party remained in power. Following the elections of 1932, the United States touted its successful efforts to secure Nicaragua's political system.³⁵

THE UNITED STATES DEPARTS

President Hoover wanted to abandon the Roosevelt Corollary and implement a Good Neighbor policy towards Latin America. As a good neighbor, the United States would not utilize military force except for the protection of American lives. After claiming success of the 1932 elections, the United States removed all its forces from Nicaragua by 1 January 1933. Two successful national elections and a non-partisan professional *Guardia Nacional* met the United States requirements as set forth in the Tipitapa agreement.³⁶

The strategic objective of the American intervention was always the conduct of free and fair elections. These elections, supervised by the United States, would set an example for the people of Nicaragua, and would allow two parties to share power as never before. The United States viewed democracy as the complete solution to all the problems of Nicaraguan society, and the U.S. believed it delivered on its promise. In addition to free and fair elections, the occupation had successfully attacked the land owning elite, and brought down the feudal system that operated across much of Nicaragua's countryside.

In addition to the creation of election law, the United States had developed a constabulary force capable of enforcing election law while remaining non-partisan to either of the country's political parties. During years of conflict against Sandino in the jungles of Nicaragua, the Marines had trained a professional and tactically proficient military organization. The *Guardia Nacional* became the finest military organization in the history of Nicaragua; and it represented the promising future of the country. This force was designed to support the new national government while representing the people of Nicaragua and protecting their rights and freedoms.

According to the measures of effectiveness established by Henry Stimson during the Tipitapa conference, the United States and her Marines should have been proud of their achievements in Nicaragua. In five years, Nicaragua held two free national presidential elections, the land owning elite surrendered much of their power, and the new *Guardia Nacional* performed above expectations. The United States would soon learn it had used the wrong measures of effectiveness, and had contributed to instability across the country.

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT FOLLOWING ELECTIONS

The Conservative party lost its second consecutive election in 1932. The former ruling party had largely been associated with causing the conditions that led to numerous American interventions. In addition to losing the political elections, much of the conservative's power base shifted at the local level because of decisions made by the Americans conducting electoral reform. The Conservatives began to promote authoritarian rule as the only way to prevent imperialism from influencing Nicaragua. The very same elite that benefited from American's diplomacy were now calling for an end to the American model of democracy in order to restore their power.³⁷

The Conservatives reached out to an unlikely ally in an attempt to denounce American imperialism and build support from the populace. They began to hail General Sandino as the defender of Nicaraguan sovereignty and urged him to join their party. General Sandino laid down his arms the day after United States troops left Nicaragua and signed a peace treaty on 2 February 1933. Nicaraguans applauded him for standing up to the Americans, and the Conservative party continued to embrace General Sandino as they attempted to connect with the populace.³⁸

Augusto Sandino struggled with his new role as a politician and he soon returned to the mountains. He wrote and published a manifesto calling for the overthrow of the new Sacasa government. He believed Nicaraguans must exterminate the United States system of democracy in order to have true Nicaraguan autonomy. Sandino continued to receive some Conservative support because of his popular anti-American sentiment and his denouncement of the existing political structure. While developing his role in Nicaraguan politics, he claimed he was a rational communist. References to communism caused all ties with the Conservative party to dissolve, and Sandino's relevance in national politics dwindled rapidly. Despite the treaty he signed in 1933, his small army in the northern mountains of Nicaragua became a target of the *Guardia Nacional* following his communist statements. The *Guardia* assassinated General Sandino after dinner with the President in February 1934, ending the armed resistance to the new government. General Sandino's death, however, did not mark the end of violence in the country; instead, it marked the beginning of the *Guardia Nacional's* involvement into politics.

This action by the *Guardia Nacional* was the beginning of the next power struggle in Nicaraguan politics. The *Guardia's* leadership no longer reflected the non-partisan professionalism of the United States Marines from 1927 to 1933. Despite the Marines' best efforts while training and equipping the *Guardia Nacional*, they failed to create field grade

officers capable of leading the organization after their departure. After the elections of 1932, the Marine *Jefe Director* recommended 30 officers to the current president and the president-elect. Both were from the same party, but had different political connections. President Moncada squeezed additional Liberal party officers onto the final list, and installed 36 officers in the *Guardia Nacional*. The Marines gave these appointees a two-week crash course in administration before they turned over command of the *Guardia Nacional* on 1 January 1933. President Moncada also pressured President Elect Sacasa to select Anastasio Somoza as the new *Jefe Director*. Dr. Sacasa was reluctant to select the politically connected Somoza, but Sacasa and Somoza were related by marriage and the United States strongly backed Somoza as the new *Jefe Director*.

Immediately tension rose between the professional soldiers of the *Guardia* and the political appointees. The new *Jefe Director* immediately made plans to expand the *Guardia* size and to finish off the rebel Sandino. Even after Sandino's treaty with the President Sacasa, Director Somoza continued to make plans for the ultimate defeat of the Sandinistas and their leader. Despite the plans to expand the *Guardia*, budget cuts caused Somoza to make choices about the missions undertaken by the *Guardia*, and more often than not, Somoza utilized his force to advance his political objectives.

General Somoza began to subsidize anti-administration newspapers, he requested amnesty for the murders of Sandino, and he later openly admitted to ordering the assassination. Somoza also began to replace members of the *Guardia Nacional* and local officials with officers loyal to him. Somoza's political shrewdness overpowered President Sacasa, and the President made numerous concessions in an attempt to appease General Somoza. At every turn, President Sacasa was undermined and Somoza's power base grew.³⁹

President Sacasa petitioned the United States to assist with reining in the activities of the *Guardia Nacional*, but the U. S. refused to accept any responsibility for the *Guardia*'s actions. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, continuing the Good Neighbor policy, would not use military intervention unless to protect American lives. President Roosevelt also amended the United States policy for recognizing Latin American governments and removed the conditions on the means of assuming power. Previous administration would not recognize a government that had subverted its constitution, but Roosevelt's only condition was the continued safety of American citizens. This policy change meant that Somoza did not need to worry about American recognition of his administration if he assumed power through violence or revolution. Somoza began using violence in May 1936, and in less than a month, he forced President Sacasa to resign.⁴⁰

An election in December 1936 made Anastasio Somoza President; he ran successfully as both the Liberal and Conservative party nominee. When inaugurated on 1 January 1937, he designated himself both *Jefe Director* and President. This ended the non-partisan *Guardia Nacional* experiment begun by the United States nine years earlier. Even while the Marines were still in Nicaragua late in 1932, they feared the *Jefe Director* would become a political appointment. Richard Millet in *Guardians of the Dynasty* observed, "By making the President and the *Jefe Director* members of the same party, it was thought that the *Guardia* would at least support the government."⁴¹ The creation of the *Guardia* was doomed from the onset according to Millet, "Any attempt to create an honest, non political military force without changing the nation's basic social and economic situation was probably impossible."⁴²

RESULTS OF UNITED STATES INTERVENTION

The Somoza family dictatorship did not end until 1976, when a revolution led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front ousted Anastasio Somoza's son from power.⁴³ A forty-year dictatorship was certainly not the goal of the American intervention when it began in 1927. Immediate concerns were halting the bloodshed from the civil war between the ruling Conservatives and the rebel Liberal armies. With relative ease, Henry Stimson was able to negotiate a cease-fire and ultimately a peace agreement. He did both with no knowledge of the region and little understanding of the culture of Nicaragua. His goals of establishing a democratic state with equitable election laws and a just constabulary are even now tough to question.

The United States intervention quelled years of turmoil and political strife in Nicaragua. American economic interests in the country drove the intervention, but American idealism set the goals of the occupation. Once involved, the United States had limited options to reduce the political tensions and bloodshed in Nicaragua. Should the United States have disregarded any economic interests in the area and ignored the suffering of a neighbor? Certainly, the United States was justified in its intervention in an attempt to bring stability to a nation, while also ensuring the safety of Americans living abroad.

While the initial intervention is certainly understandable, the policy aims of the United States as spelled out in the Tipitapa agreement are questionable. Under what pretenses could the United States have departed Nicaragua and felt that they had left a more stable and secure country? Firmly planting the seeds of democracy is only a starting point for empowering the population and instilling self-determination. While the United States believed democracy was a giant step towards stability in Nicaragua, this did not match our own democratic experience. Democracy in the United States was born out of a shared hardship and it was a collective

solution to a problem. Michel Gobat in his epilogue to *Imperial Legacies* quotes an American military officer supervising the 1930 elections:

Poverty and ignorance have reduced [the local populace] to such a primitive state that abstractions such as democratic government, the free ballot, etc., have no meaning for them. They lack even the most primitive conception of law and justice, and I doubt if, beyond following some local leader or other they have any clear idea of what is going on in Nicaragua today.⁴⁴

While Nicaraguans might not have been ready for democracy, the Marines provided them the opportunity to experiment with a democratically elected government. The shift in the power base in Nicaraguan politics ultimately caused too many grievances for the Conservative party, and they resorted to supporting the rebel Sandino.

Michel Gobat's thesis on his chapter about the United States intervention in 1927 was "US efforts to impose democracy not only failed to produce deep and durable democratization; they actually paved the way for authoritarian rule."⁴⁵ Was the failure the strategy to impose democracy or the implementation of this policy by the Marines? It is difficult to look at the successes of the Marines in all of their endeavors and see failure. The state only failed after the departure of the Marines, and the Marines departed because of policy changes in Washington, D.C. U. S. Marines conducted successful counterinsurgency operations, established a non-partisan *Guardia Nacional*, and ensured free and fair elections in 1928 and 1932, but the withdrawal of American support commensurate with the withdrawal of the Marines allowed for the subversion of democracy in Nicaragua.

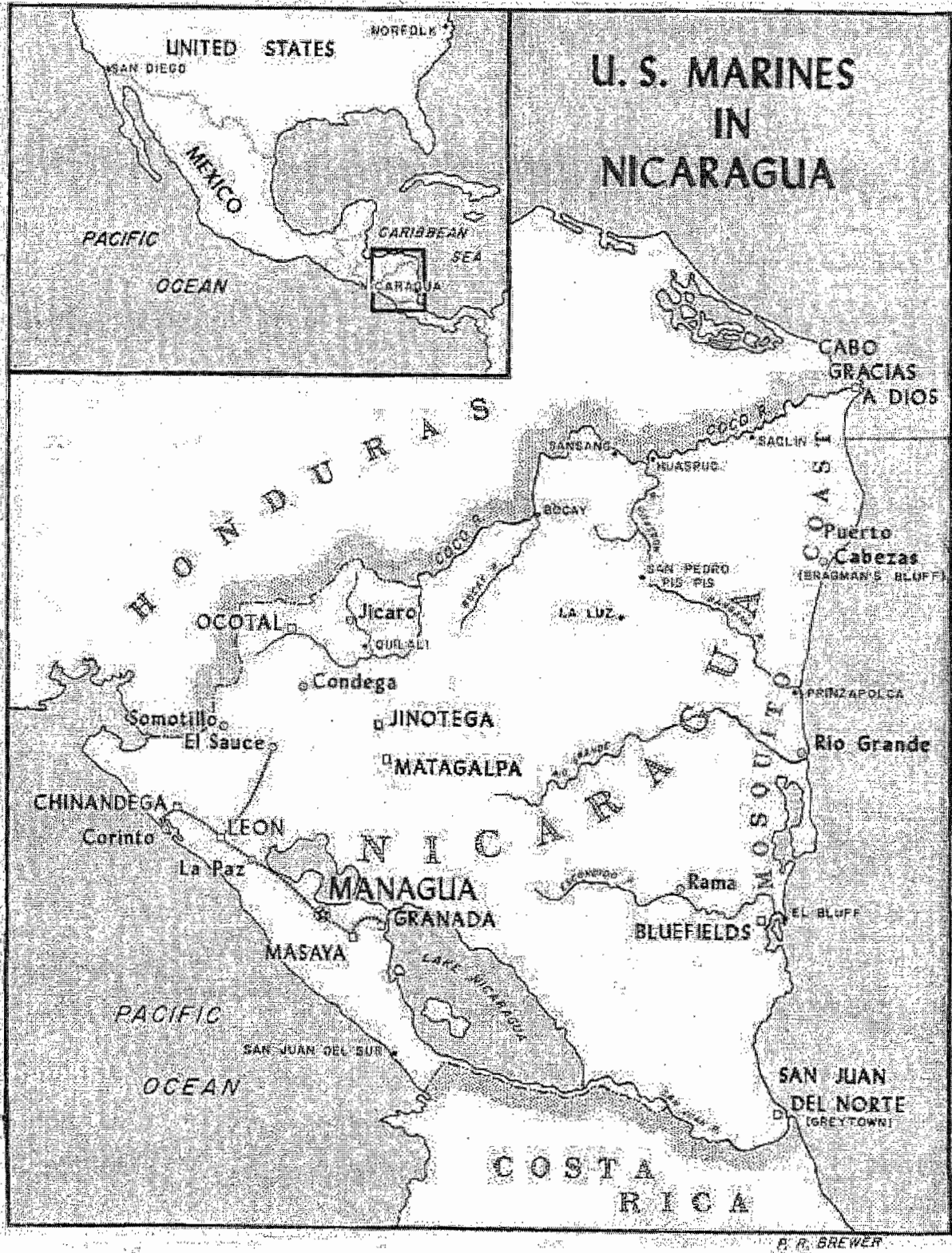


Figure 1: Map of Nicaragua

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- ² Nalty, 11-13.
- ³ Nalty, 14. Allan Reed Millet, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 244, Francis P. Mulcahy, "Marine Corps Aviation in the Second Nicaraguan Campaign," United States Naval Institute *Proceedings*, August 1933, 1121.
- ⁴ Henry L. Stimson *American Policy in Nicaragua* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), 61.
- ⁵ Millett 244-245, Nalty 14, Neill Macaulay, *The Sandino Affair* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1985) 34.
- ⁶ Macaulay, 29, Stimson 117
- ⁷ Millett 245-247; Nalty 15-17
- ⁸ Macaulay 38-45
- ⁹ Macaulay 47-48
- ¹⁰ Macaulay 49-53
- ¹¹ Macaulay, 54-56
- ¹² Neill, Macaulay, "Sandino and the Marines: Guerrilla Warfare in Nicaragua, 1927-1933." (PhD Dissertation, University of TX, 1965), 70.
- ¹³ A. Millett 247-250
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- ¹⁵ A. Millett 251, Macaulay 130-133
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- ¹⁸ A. Millett 252, Further research was conducted for my AY 2011 Campaign Analysis: Operational Reach: The Use of Marine Aviation in Nicaragua
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- ²⁰ Mulcahy 124-126, Nalty 19
- ²¹ Clark 65-81
- ²² Macaulay 137-139, Clark 90-100
- ²³ Craig L. Dozier, *Nicaragua's Mosquito Shore: The Years of British and American Presence*. (University of Alabama Press, 1985), 208, Macaulay 149
- ²⁴ Nalty 29-34
- ²⁵ Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua Under U.S. Imperial Rule* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 203, Brent L. Gravatt "The Marines and the Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua 1927-1932" (Master's thesis, Duke University, 1973), 1.
- ²⁶ Gravatt 47-51
- ²⁷ Gravatt 112, Richard Millet *Guardians of the Dynasty: A History of the U. S. Created Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua and the Somoza Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 71.
- ²⁸ Gobat 216-218
- ²⁹ Gravatt 60-62 Gobat 216-218
- ³⁰ Gobat 205, 220, 230
- ³¹ Gravatt 147, R. Millet 134-139
- ³² Gobat 205
- ³³ Stimson 118
- ³⁴ Gobat 208-209
- ³⁵ Ivan Musicant, *The Banana Wars: A History of United States Military Intervention in Latin America from the Spanish-American War to the Invasion of Panama*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company), 1990. 356-57, Gobat 212-213, Nalty 33
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- ³⁷ Gobat 230
- ³⁸ Gobat 246
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⁴⁰ R. Millett 176-180, Jones 116-117

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⁴² R. Millett 183

⁴³ Gobat 267

⁴⁴ Gobat 270

⁴⁵ Gobat 206

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