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# ROOTS OF CRISIS

**NICARAGUA**

## The lessons of 1926 apply in 1986

By Walter LaFeber

**T**he U.S. Marines, the State Department declared, must go into Nicaragua to save that country from "Bolshevik aims and policies." *The Sun* examined the State Department's case and promptly pronounced it "drivel."

Historians agree that the newspaper was correct in 1926. But the judgment of history was no solace for the U.S. soldiers who returned home in coffins or the thousands of Nicaraguans who died in the fighting. Those Nicaraguans included some who were killed by one of the first dive-bombing attacks ever carried out by U.S. military planes. Despite their superiority in firepower, however, North Americans found themselves trapped in a bloody guerrilla war that lasted seven years.

The time was 1926, but the lessons clearly apply to 1986. The president was Calvin Coolidge, whose discredited foreign and domestic policies properly rank him with Pierce and Harding in the Pantheon of Failed Presidents. (Ronald Reagan, however, has hung Coolidge's portrait on a White House wall once reserved for Harry Truman's picture.) In retrospect, it is clear that U.S. policies in Nicaragua had failed well before the mid-1920s. Coolidge's use of force was simply an admission of that failure.

The origins of the bankrupt policy are most instructive. During the half-century between 1860 and 1910, the United States, for the only time in the past 150 years, mostly kept its hands off Nicaragua. The result was the one era when Nicaragua's political and economic institutions stabilized. Jose Santos Zelaya presided over the last decade of this era. Zelaya was a dictator, hardly a novel occupation in his region, but he was also anti-U.S. — which was novel — preaching that Central America should be for Central Americans and not under the control of U.S. business and naval interests.

In 1909-1910, a U.S.-supported revolt overthrew Zelaya. But the State Department suddenly found itself in a dilemma that deserves close study. Having overthrown Zelaya, U.S. officials discovered that their nominee for his replacement, Adolfo Diaz, formerly a clerk in a U.S.

company, had a rather serious political disability: Nicaraguans refused to have anything to do with him. They saw Diaz as a U.S. puppet who seemed too willing to auction off their nation to North American bidders. Another rebellion erupted. This time 2,500 U.S. Marines landed to protect our Nicaraguan.

Thus began a 20-year U.S. occupation of the country, an experience few people in the United States seem to know about, but which has deeply branded the Nicaraguan consciousness. The Marines temporarily pulled out in 1925. They had supervised "fair" elections, and a pro-U.S. regime entered office. Within weeks, the thin political crust laid on by Washington officials again began bubbling dangerously. Fighting broke out. The Marines returned, this time to destroy the "Bolshevik aims" imagined by the Coolidge administration.

Now, however, the troops encountered a peasant-supported, anti-U.S. guerrilla war led by young Augusto Sandino. Using the northern mountains for cover and the peasant masses for support, Sandino held off a U.S. force that grew to more than 5,000 men.

Sandino was becoming a hero to Latin Americans as a freedom fighter, but Coolidge grimly determined to get that "bandit."

Sen. George Norris, a Republican from Nebraska, observed that if the president's objective was to capture bandits, the Marines might better be stationed in Chicago. A leading journalist, Heywood Brown, noted Coolidge's faith that U.S. troops could guarantee democracy in Nicaragua and concluded that if that was true, which Brown doubted, the troops were badly needed to "superintend the next balloting in Philadelphia."

Such growing criticism, Sandino's ruthlessness as a fighter, and the growing cost of the war in both North American lives and dollars finally drove President Herbert Hoover to pull out the troops in 1933. But they left behind a U.S.-trained National Guard under the command of Anastasio Somoza, whose colloquial English and knowledge of baseball commended him to Washington officials.

When Sandino came into Managua to lay down his arms and support the Nicaraguan regime, Somoza had him killed in cold blood. Thus began the more than three-decade-long Somoza dictatorship, supported by the United States, that exploited and distorted

Dr. LaFeber is professor of history at Cornell University. His most recent book is "Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America."

continued

Nicaragua until the Somozas owned 25 percent of the land and his National Guard officers — several of whom now head the U.S.-backed "contras" forces — skimmed off the most profitable businesses.

U.S. leaders learned little from this history. Indeed, in 1954 they ordered a CIA operation that overthrew an elected, reform-minded government in Guatemala. The post-1933 Nicaraguan experience was repeated.

Recently the U.S. Marine Corps colonel who helped lead the CIA-controlled Guatemalan invaders called the overthrow "a terrible mistake."

"Our 'success,' " Phillip C. Roettlinger now believes, "led to 31 years of repressive military rule and the deaths of more than 100,000 Guatemalans." Moreover, Colonel Roettlinger continued, the U.S. "success" destroyed badly needed social and economic reforms. "Thirty years later, Nicaraguans finally have such benefits; Guatemalans and Hondurans are still waiting," he concluded.

Historians who have finally been able to examine the 1954 documents agree that the CIA's military response to imagined threats in order to support disreputable exile groups not only condemned Guatemala to three

decades of terror, but corrupted U.S. policies and ideals elsewhere. One example: Evidence now reveals that the ease of the 1954 overthrow misled the CIA and other U.S. officials to try to repeat the operation against Fidel Castro's Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. The ensuing disaster only established Castro's power more firmly.

The U.S. use of military force, and more recently of CIA activities, to control Central America dominates the historical record. That history teaches at least three lessons.

First, without exception no U.S. military operation in the region has created the conditions for democracy or more just economic systems.

The opposite has occurred. In Honduras between the 1890s and 1920s and now especially in the 1980s, as well as in Nicaragua and Guatemala before the 1980s, the U.S. involvement helped polarize the politics, distorted the economics and, ironically, often increased the appeal of the militant left.

Second, Washington's policy has followed strict "isolationism."

In U.S. diplomatic history, isolationism — contrary to Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger's recent use of the word — has

not meant withdrawal from world affairs. It has meant a unilateral, "go-it-alone" approach to those affairs. Only for a relatively brief time in the 1930s has the United States seriously considered its relationship with Latin America as a two-way street.

Hopes for a more cooperative policy ended in 1965 when U.S. officials persuaded their neighbors in the hemisphere to intervene militarily in the Dominican Republic to stop a supposed Communist takeover. When it turned out that the communist threat was

non-existent, the Latin Americans developed an immunity to Washington's alarms. In 1979 the Carter administration tried to use Inter-American groups to intervene in Nicaragua before the Sandinistas could gain power. But the memories of 1965, as well of Guatemala in 1954, were too fresh. Without exception, the Latin American nations refused to join.

This background helps us understand why so many Latin American governments believe U.S. policies in Central America over the past century have not only failed, but have played a major role in creating the current, deepening problems in the region. The background also helps us understand why the Reagan administration has consistently

refused to give anything more than lip service to the Contadora peace plans. Those plans for settling Central American issues through diplomatic negotiations have been endorsed by eight governments representing 350 million Latin Americans. But the Contadora proposals run directly against the historic U.S. policy of using military power in Central America, and also run counter to the traditional U.S. determination to follow a policy of isolationism rather than cooperation in the hemisphere. Given the record before as well as after 1981, there is little evidence for believing that the United States is seriously interested in the Contadora approach.

A third lesson seems to be that the Reagan administration is intent on repeating a history of failed U.S. policies in Central America. It is striking to note how post-1981 policy has been opposed by U.S. military officers and knowledgeable State Department officials who have argued — on the basis of solid historical evidence — that the region's problems are economic and social, not military and ideological, and that these problems will best be solved by negotiation, not force. It is equally striking to note that for their understanding of this history, most of these dissenters have been either silenced or purged from top policy-making positions.

U.S. policies have consequently been separated from reality. The president tries to bridge the widening gap with rhetoric. He compares the Nicaraguan "contras" with "the French Resistance that fought the Nazis." Those in Congress who disagree are accused of giving comfort to the communists. Nicaragua, which has fewer adult males than the United States has men under arms and whose total national income is less than North Americans spend on antacid tablets, shaving products and cosmetics, becomes a nearly unstoppable source of the Red Tide that, as administration maps showed on television, washes down over Brazil and up over Mexico. (Later the Reagan administration apologized to angry Brazilian officials for so blatantly misrepresenting their country's situation.)

To paraphrase Robert Frost, an understanding of history can be a momentary stay against confusion. With that understanding, the United States, as the overwhelmingly superior power in the region, can begin to correct its past mistakes. Without that understanding, it will not only repeat that past, but confuse the present and condemn the future of our Central American policies.