

Everyday Imperialism: Marines in Nicaragua, 1926-1934

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Thesis: Through primary sources such as oral histories, newspapers, drawings and diaries, my paper examines the attitudes of Marines towards the people of Nicaragua as well as their mission. By examining those attitudes through the lens of official and unofficial narratives, we can understand how these Marines navigated their environment and in most instances, projected imperialist attitudes that accompanied the interventionist actions of the United States government.

What are my primary sources?

Dr. Michael Schroeder's archival history at www.sandinorebellion.com and the collection of "Special Brigade News" at the MCRD Command Museum in San Diego.

What is imperialism in this context?

American imperialism is distinct from say, British imperialism, in that while no direct governing control exists, there is economic control frequently accompanied by political and military intervention. At this time in Nicaragua, the doctrines of Dollar Diplomacy and the Good Neighbor Policy were especially important.

Timeline of Events

- 1909:** U.S. Marines overthrow President Zelaya.
- 1909-1925:** On-and-off occupation of Nicaragua
- 1925:** U.S. Marines pull out of Nicaragua following the election
- 1926:** (January) Conflict breaks out between the Liberals and Conservatives; by June, the Marines have landed in Nicaragua again.
- 1927:** Augusto C. Sandino issues his manifesto declaring his continued opposition to the Marines' occupation.
- 1933:** Conflict ends in a peace treaty; Marines completely pull out of Nicaragua.
- February 12, 1934:** The Guardia Nacional assassinates Sandino under orders from the U.S.
- 1936:** Director of the Guardia Nacional Anastasio Somoza, with approval and support from the U.S., establishes a dictatorial dynasty.



Cartoon depiction of "The First Plane Drop, Peña Blanca, 1927" ca. January 12, 1930, Robert L. Denig Personal Paper Collection, MCRD, Quantico, VA. Digitized online at sandinorebellion.com

Example of Primary Source Analysis

Unofficial Narrative:

"I'm restricted for ten days. I can't leave the compound except on duty. Four other guys with me. The five of us shot at a gook and only one man hit. No it wasn't a case of poor marksmanship it was a case of assassin unknown so we were up before the C.O. and got 10 days restrictions so the natives would be satisfied that we were punished so we got 10 days with a little Extra Police Work."

PFC Emil Thomas, letter to fiancé Beatrice, 4/1/28

Official Narrative:

[Responding to a case of grave vandalism] "The U.S. Marines, not only those serving Nicaragua, but in whatever part of the world they may be serving deprecate such acts of violence against the resting places of the dead and wish to express their indignation toward such acts of vandalism."

Second Brigade News, 6/16/29

Analysis and Conclusion

Looking at the difference between the unofficial and official narratives of Nicaragua, there is a great disparity in how the Marines portrayed themselves - benevolent versus violent. This disparity suggests an inability to address the systematic problems and attitudes in the U.S. Marine Corps. As Nicaragua proved to be a crucial testing ground for tactics used in future asymmetric conflicts in Vietnam and the Middle East, it can be inferred that those same imperialist attitudes may have followed. Given that these efforts to establish democracy fail, I can conclude that one of the causes is the undemocratic attitudes exhibited by the system.

References

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