A Cautionary Tale of American Intervention

By John Fitzpatrick

The U.S. President is on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, the polity is war-weary, the nation’s economy is struggling to gain momentum, and many members of Congress are suspicious of executive overreach. On the other hand, long-standing rivalries are once again threatening the stability of a strategically placed nation; in fact, the very nation where America has expended a goodly amount of time, energy, and money in recent years. Hawkish advocates are claiming that a small force of elite fighters, augmented by airpower could tip the balance in America’s favor; meanwhile, less optimistic activists warn against intervention. So what would you do if you were President? If you opted to deploy forces to Iraq, you would be wrong; in fact, a deployment to anywhere in the Middle East would be ludicrous. The reason why those options are inappropriate is because the situation in question has nothing to do with Iraq. While this scenario seems as if it is referring to existing travails, in truth, it harkens back to Nicaragua almost ninety years ago. Back then; President Coolidge wrestled with a number less than perfect options - options that President Obama would find eerily familiar. In the end, President Coolidge intervened with a contingent of Marines. In the wake of this intervention, Nicaragua managed to overcome years of political turmoil to hold peaceful elections; however, only a few years later, a young dictator by the name of Somoza assumed power, and there he would remain for the ensuing 45 years.

How is it that a dispute between two political parties can devolve into a military dictatorship in the span of a few short years? Suffice it to say that Somoza’s meteoric rise was not inevitable, and it had as much to do with the context of the situation as it did the strengths and weaknesses of the belligerents. This essay will examine the details of both the context of the situation as well as the warring factions. The hope is that this investigation will shed light on a little-remembered chapter of American history; thus providing policy makers with yet another historical data point to draw upon.

Context

With respect to its landmass, Nicaragua is a relatively small nation (akin to the state of New York); however, what it lacked in size, it more than made up for in complexity. Back in the 1920s, the vast majority of the population inhabited the fertile coastal plain that hugged the Pacific Ocean. A small number of subsistence farmers, mostly immigrants from the Caribbean, did what they could to survive in the dense jungle that dominated the center of the country. And lastly, far from the reaches of the nation’s capital, were the large plantations that dotted the nation’s Atlantic shore, commonly referred to as the Mosquito Coast. The turmoil that afflicted the nation around the turn of the century had much to do with a long-standing power struggle between the Liberals from town of Leon and the Conservatives from nearby Granada. While these locales are only a short distance from one another, from a political sense, they are worlds apart. It is difficult to overemphasize the degree to which the conflict between these two
communities has tainted matters in Nicaragua. Starting in 1912, the Marines experienced this phenomenon first hand.[7]

In the years leading up to the Marines’ intervention, the Liberals were led by President Jose Santos Zelaya – a dictator who had ruled Nicaragua since 1893.[8] Zelaya openly flouted America, and even went so far as to court the Japanese to build an alternative to the Panama Canal.[9] In 1909, much to the satisfaction of American politicians, a rebel leader by the name of Estrada emerged in the town of Bluefields on the Mosquito Coast.[10] Against the odds, and with the tacit support of the U.S. Consul, General Estrada eventually seized power. In the ensuing election, the Nicaraguan people elected Adolfo Diaz from the Conservative Party to be their new President.[11] While President Diaz enjoyed the support of the politi, this was not the case with the Armed Forces. In an effort to solidify his hold on power, Diaz requested the military from the United States.[12] In short order, the Marines landed and the situation stabilized.[13] As quickly as they landed, the vast majority of the Marines redeployed; however, a small 100-man legation guard detachment remained behind for more than a decade.[14] This token force was sufficient to suppress political unrest for a number of years, but it did little in the way of solving Nicaragua’s power sharing problem.

While their aims were probably self-serving, the Conservative Party did reach out to their Liberal counterparts in the years that followed the Marine intervention. In fact, one might say that actual progress seemed to be taking place because in 1924, the Nicaraguan people voted a coalition ticket into office. That year, President Solozano, a member of the Conservative Party, took office alongside Vice President Sacasa, a member of the Liberal Party.[15] Unfortunately, this spirit of cooperation was short lived. Within six months, an ultra-Conservative by the name of Chamorro seized power and purged the government of its Liberal representatives.[16] In response to Chamorro’s purging, the Liberals took a page out of their adversary’s playbook by initiating their own revolt along the Mosquito Coast.[17] In the weeks that followed, the Nicaraguan congress elected Diaz as an interim President; however, the Marxist-leaning Mexican government argued that Sacasa (the former Vice President) should assume the seat of power.[18] In order to deescalate the situation, President Coolidge begrudgingly dispatched the Marines once again; although this time, the Marines were not alone.[19] Unlike in times past, the President also deployed a special negotiator; namely, the former Secretary of War, Henry Stimson.[20] This diplomatic investment paid tremendous dividends -- in less that one month, Stimson was able to strike an agreement.[21] Both sides agreed to allow the Conservatives to remain in power until elections could be held in 1928.[22] Conservatives and Liberals alike began to relinquish their weapons to the Marines.[23] And then, just as it seemed that Nicaragua was on the brink of reconciliation, a wildcard emerged. Out of the jungles of the central highlands, an erstwhile unknown Liberal soldier by the name of Sandino initiated his own rebellion.

Rebels

The Marines would soon discover that General Augusto Cesar Sandino was a passionate man, and a fierce adversary.[24] As a testament to his principled manner, Sandino was the only general from the Liberal Party that did not abide by the Tipitapa Agreement brokered by Henry Stimson.[25] In Sandino’s opinion, this agreement perpetuated Yanqui exploitation, and he could not live with that compromise, no matter how much the Liberal Party stood to gain.[26] Much like their leader, Sandino’s men proved to be spirited fighters as well. Aside from being mentally and physically tough, Sandino’s forces were rather well equipped, and they were masters of their jungle domain.[27] Thanks to their intimate knowledge of the terrain, along with their insightful intelligence networks, time and again, the insurgents were able to lure their adversaries into ambushes, and then disappear without a trace.[28] Not only were the Sandinistas, as they came to be know, masters of exploiting terrain in Nicaragua, they also took advantage
of the sanctuary that existed over the border in Honduras. Thanks to this sanctuary, as well as resupply provided by the government of Mexico, General Sandino and his men were able to frustrate Marines for years. That said, Sandino was not without his faults.

One of General Sandino’s great strengths was his fiery passion; however, this was also one of his great downs falls. As is the case with many inexperienced insurgent leaders, Sandino was too aggressive at first. For example, in what became the first battle between Sandino and the Marines, the General laid siege to a Marine outpost in the town of Ocotol. What the General came to realize was that while his forces had the courage to stand toe-to-toe with the Marines; in doing so, they presented a lucrative target to Marine aviators. The Sandinistas’ temerity enabled them to go down in history as the first victims of Marine close air support. Sandino’s men would learn from this mistake, but all their tactical acumen could not compensate for their leader’s strategic bumbling. Despite numerous offers on the part of various communist powers, Sandino would not align himself with their ideology; and because of this, his forces were unable to tap into a number of sources of support. Sandino’s external support concerns were problematic, but they were dwarfed by the fact that his message did not resonate with the polity. Although Sandino’s forces received intelligence and supplies from jungle villagers, his cause never gained traction elsewhere. It is difficult to say why Sandino’s message did not take root. It could be that complex demographics made for a variety of grievances, or it could be that the Nicaraguan people were war weary. No matter the reason, the truth of the matter was that Sandino and his men became less relevant with each passing month. With help from the Marines, the 1928 election was a resounding success. What is more, by the time the elections of 1932 occurred, the Marine presence was limited to a token force, and Sandino was, at most, a minor irritant. The momentum of the Nicaraguan status quo proved to be too much for Sandino’s idyllic intentions.

Counterinsurgents

The force that squared off against Sandino’s insurgents was a somewhat complex and dynamic one. At the outset, U.S. Marines made up the preponderance of the fighting force; however, as the conflict wore on, the Nicaraguan National Guard (henceforth referred to as the Guardia) assumed more and more of the workload. The Guardia started out an indigenous force that was Officered by Marines. In the years that followed, the Guardia became more capable, and eventually, it became self-sufficient. It was these two organizations – the Marines and the Guardia – that eliminated the Sandinista threat, but their triumph was far from a foregone conclusion, especially during the initial phase of the conflict. Like Sandino, the counterinsurgent force had its strengths and weaknesses, and like the previous section, each will be addressed in detail.

According to Professor James Joes, one of the most important tasks that a counterinsurgent force must do is to shape the strategic environment. A counterinsurgent force can accomplish this task three different ways; namely, it can peacefully address the root cause, it can devote an adequate number of forces, and it can eliminate outside support. It is somewhat surprising that the Marines and Guardia fared as well as they did because they did not perform these tasks particularly well. Chief amongst these shortfalls was America’s unwillingness to commit a sufficient number of forces to the task at hand. President Coolidge knew that the situation in Nicaragua was too important to ignore; however, he also knew that neither Congress, nor the American people had much of an appetite for a large-scale expedition. Throughout the course of this intervention, the Marine footprint never exceeded four thousand personnel, but in the end, this half-measure almost proved costly. At first, the Marines occupied the population centers and relied upon the Guardia to take on Sandino’s forces. This approach proved to be a complete disaster. The Guardia was too inexperienced, and as a result, they were decimated. In short order, the Marines tasked the Guardia to secure their garrisons while they themselves entered into
the fray. The alternative strategy placed Sandino’s forces on the defensive, and it bought the Guardia the time it needed to mature into a combat-ready force. Despite significant progress, even when the Marines and the Guardia were at their best, that force was unable to accomplish the task of securing Nicaragua’s daunting borders. The size and the topography of the border with Honduras made it impossible to cut off Sandino’s outside support. The counterinsurgents did enjoy one short-term success with regard to the strategic environment, and that was the conduct of free and fair elections. It seems that political choice, coupled with general war weariness on the part of Nicaraguans trumped the other shortfalls that dealt with the strategic environment.

Professor Joes focuses on strategic issues, but he does not limit his analysis to those matters. In addition to the measures mentioned earlier, the author also recommends that counterinsurgents take on their counterparts in a direct manner. Simply stated, Joes encourages governments to accomplish the following: display rectitude, emphasize intelligence, divide insurgent leaders and followers, offer amnesty, and reduce insurgents’ access to firearms and food. Contrary to his strategic tasks, the Marines and the Guardia actually accomplished a number of Dr. Joes’ more tactical tasks. To begin with, government forces did an excellent job of separating insurgent leaders from their followers. At first, this undertaking was accomplished by way of accurate firepower. The superior marksmanship of the Marines, coupled with the propensity for Sandinista leaders to plan their own escape resulted in an inordinate number of dead insurgent foot soldiers. As the conflict wore on, government forces began to offer amnesty to rebel fighters, and this too helped to drive a wedge between the insurgent leaders and their followers. From a professional sense, it seems that Marines managed to correct the ethical shortcomings that plagued them in previous contingencies (e.g. The Philippines, Haiti, Dominican Republic).

Although there is some evidence that members of the Guardia did mutilate bodies on occasion, Marines were never implicated. As far as limiting insurgents’ access to firearms and food was concerned, government efforts were not effective. While a program of reconcentration was put into effect at one point, it was short lived. As far as Joes’ recommendation regarding intelligence is concerned, the Marines were an utter failure. In fact, after Army Brigadier General McCoy completed his assignment as the head of the 1928 electoral commission, he filed a report that mentioned how aghast he was at the dearth of intelligence.

According to Dr. Joes’ approach, government forces did fair to middling; yet, there are a few measures that do not fit neatly into any of the professor’s categories, and these considerations bear mentioning.

Dr. Joes is a well-respected and accomplished academic; however, he has never served in uniform. The professor’s lack of practical experience likely caused him to overlook some subtle attributes that ought to be considered by any counterinsurgent force. Two attributes that he overlooks are situational awareness and innovation. History is replete with instances of militaries that fight a conflict in much the same way that they fought their previous conflict. Such was not the case with the Marines in Nicaragua. The Americans that deployed to Nicaragua in 1926 based their strategy upon the situation at hand; as opposed to implementing an approach that was based upon rote memory. The Marines realized that the situation in Nicaragua was unlike what they experienced in the Philippines. Rather than stand up a new government, the situation in Nicaragua required the Marines to act in a manner that did not detract from the government’s legitimacy. This being the case, the Marines were loath to perform civil functions for fear of undermining the extant government. Some officials took the Marines to task for their lack of civic programs; however, in retrospect, the Marines’ decision to avoid such undertakings seems to be rooted in sound logic. The fact that Marines provided earthquake relief in 1931 and some semblance of an immunization program gives credence to the idea that the Marines did not reject civil projects; but rather, they made strategic use of such programs. One other highlight of this operation was the Marines’ innovative use of aviation. To that point, militaries had employed air assets almost exclusively in an
observation role. The Marines, on the other hand, were quick to employ these assets in various new roles to include close air support, medevac, and logistic resupply.\footnote{53} As far as training was concerned, the Marines should received mixed marks. Despite their vast experience in non-conventional conflicts, they failed to produce any official doctrine that addressed these types of operations.\footnote{54} That said, thanks to the professional journals that existed at the time, a substantial amount of informal doctrine existed.\footnote{55} What is more, while Marines did not provide formal instruction on how to conduct small wars, they did establish a training facility in Nicaragua that was purportedly quite effective.\footnote{56} One final consideration that escaped Dr. Joes’ notice was the combat experience that Marines amassed. If one examines the historical records of World War II and the Korean War, they will discover that many of the most influential Marines cut their teeth in the jungles of Nicaragua.\footnote{57} On balance, the Marines benefitted a great deal from their experience in Nicaragua; what is more, Nicaragua benefitted from America’s intervention – or so it seemed at the time.

Denouement

When the Marines first intervened in Nicaragua’s latest chapter of unrest, they quickly ushered the Guardia to the front lines.\footnote{58} The Marines’ intent was for Nicaraguans to solve their own problems. In short order, the Marines realized that the Guardia was not up to the task.\footnote{59} As was alluded to earlier, the Marines decided that they and the Guardia needed to switch roles, at least for the interim. This decision turned the tide. As the Marines went on the offensive, Sandino and his men recoiled and remained on the defensive for the remainder of the conflict.\footnote{60} As time passed, the Marines turned over security responsibilities to the Guardia at a metered pace. Thanks in large part to the Marine Officers that provided the Guardia its leadership, the once rag-tag lot developed into an effective fighting force.\footnote{61} The ultimate assessment for the Guardia was the 1932 elections, and they passed that test with flying colors.\footnote{62} In stark contrast to the 1928 elections, which saw the Marine presence at an all-time high, the 1932 elections was the exact opposite. Marine presence was limited to a token force, and those Marines did little more than occupy garrisons in population centers.\footnote{63} It was the Guardia that safeguarded the electoral process - all the while keeping the Sandinistas on the run in the central highlands. Such was the state of play as 1932 drew to a close. Back in the United States, the economy was in dire straits, and President Herbert Hoover was anxious to end American commitments where possible.\footnote{64} Late in 1932, the Marines received word that they should draw up plans to redeploy, and by early the next year, the American involvement in Nicaragua was over.\footnote{65} That said, just because America lost interest in Nicaragua’s problems did not mean those problems ceased to exist.

As was the case in the 1928, the Liberal Party won the 1932 elections. In an effort to further enhance security gains, the new President attempted to make peace with the Sandinistas.\footnote{66} Within months of the 1932 elections, most of the remaining Sandinista fighters had agreed to lay down their arms. While the government and the Sandinistas were coming to terms, the animosity level was rising within the Guardia.\footnote{67} Many members of the Guardia felt betrayed at the thought that their government would be negotiating with the rebels that caused their institution so much anguish. The individual that felt most betrayed was the Guardia’s jeffe director – a man by the name of Anastasio Somoza.\footnote{68} In fact, Somoza was so appalled that he took matters into his own hands. As part of an effort to reintegrate Sandino into the political process, he and some of his deputies were invited to a reception at the Presidential Palace.\footnote{69} After the reception, members of the Guardia transported Sandino’s party to the local airport; however, instead of boarding a plane, the entire party was executed by Somoza’s firing squad.\footnote{70} This execution was a harbinger of things to come. The political progress that had been achieved over the past few years frittered away. The rapid decay of political progress reached its nadir in 1936 when Somoza seized power.\footnote{71} Somoza the dictator would go on to rule Nicaragua for the next 45 years.\footnote{72} Looking back, it is accurate to say that the Marines were change agents in Nicaragua. What once had been a farcical excuse
of an electoral process had been transformed into a legitimate institution. What is more, an efficient cadre
of skilled warriors had replaced the inept, corrupt Nicaraguan Army. The Marines did what they always
do, they eliminated threats and they brought about stability; unfortunately, as monumental as these
achievements were, they only addressed the symptoms, not the disease itself. The problem of political
animosity and suspicion remained, and there was virtually nothing the Marines could do about it. Try as
they might, the Marines military solution did not solve the political problem at hand. Simply stated, short
term gain brought about long-term pain.

Conclusion

In response to the chaos that emerged in Nicaragua, President Coolidge resorted to what had become
standard practice during the age of intervention (1899-1933); namely, send in the Marines. The military
instrument of power has long been an alluring option for executive branch. American presidents often
default to the use of military power because, more often than not, the armed forces can react quickly and
they deliver results. Of course, this manner of statecraft is not without its shortcomings; namely, it is
expensive, and some sectors frown upon such activity. These drawbacks often cause military
interventions to be of short duration. Given all of these considerations, one could almost predict the
outcome in Nicaragua. The Marines deployed in short order and they proceeded to employ the tools of
their trade to the best of their ability. Inside a year, the Marines deployed, contained Sandino’s forces, and
forged the Guardia into a respectable fighting force. One task the Marines did not take on was the
political power struggle that had undergirded Nicaraguan unrest for decades. In sum, the Marines
concentrated on attaining short-term results with the tools that were at their disposal, and after they had
secured their objectives, they prepared to move on to the next task. What is notable is that it does not
appear that anyone concerned themselves with addressing the root cause of Nicaragua’s problems or
assessing the long-term implications of the Marines’ actions. The executive branch did not send
diplomats to negotiate an agreement amongst local power brokers, nor did it coordinate with regional
partners to establish a peacekeeping force. Instead, the Marines redeployed and the situation devolved
back into a state of chaos because the root cause of the conflict continued to fester. Sadly, this approach
seems to be the rule rather than the exception. This observation brings us back to the ongoing situation in
Iraq.

During the now famous surge in Iraq, the executive branch once again turned to the military in its time of
need. As has been the case more often than not, the military was able to achieve results in relatively short
order; however, the objectives that the military accomplished were, by and large, focused on short-term
security concerns. As in the past, the executive branch was quick to sheath this weapon – a decision that
had much to do with its monetary and political costs. As the military redeployed, it left a security void in
its wake. Aside from this concern, the root causes of the conflict remained unaddressed. The executive
branch did not follow through with a diplomatic surge to help the Iraqis guard against future unrest. As a
result of these decisions, the Iraqi security apparatus is a shell of what it once was, and the nation risks
plummeting once again into civil war. The root causes of instability in Iraq have yet to be addressed, and
there is little reason to believe that a contingent of U.S. military personnel, no matter how skilled, are
going to help bring about long-term political compromise. While the military can, at times, set the
conditions for change, it is not an institution that is capable of bringing about societal change on its own.
If changes of this magnitude are possible, they are not likely to occur unless diplomatic negotiators and
local political elites chart the path; however, it does not seem that America has the propensity to follow-
through in this manner. Perhaps American culture is devoid of the patience and foresight that is required
to take full of its military successes. Failure to devote sufficient effort towards long-term stability
objectives has been a recipe for disaster in the past. Policy makers should keep this historical trend in
mind when they contemplate future interventions for in foreign policy, as in sport; a proper follow-
through seems to be critical to success.

End Notes


[5] Ibid., 239.

[6] Ibid.


[14] Ibid.


[17] Ibid., 26.


[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.


[26] Ibid.


[28] Ibid., 158.

[29] Ibid., 160.


[38] Ibid.


[41] Ibid., 167–168.
[42] Ibid., 171.


[44] Ibid., 254.


[54] Ibid., 141.

[55] Ibid., 161.

[56] Ibid., 187.


[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid., 171.

[61] Ibid.


[65] Ibid., 250.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid.


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